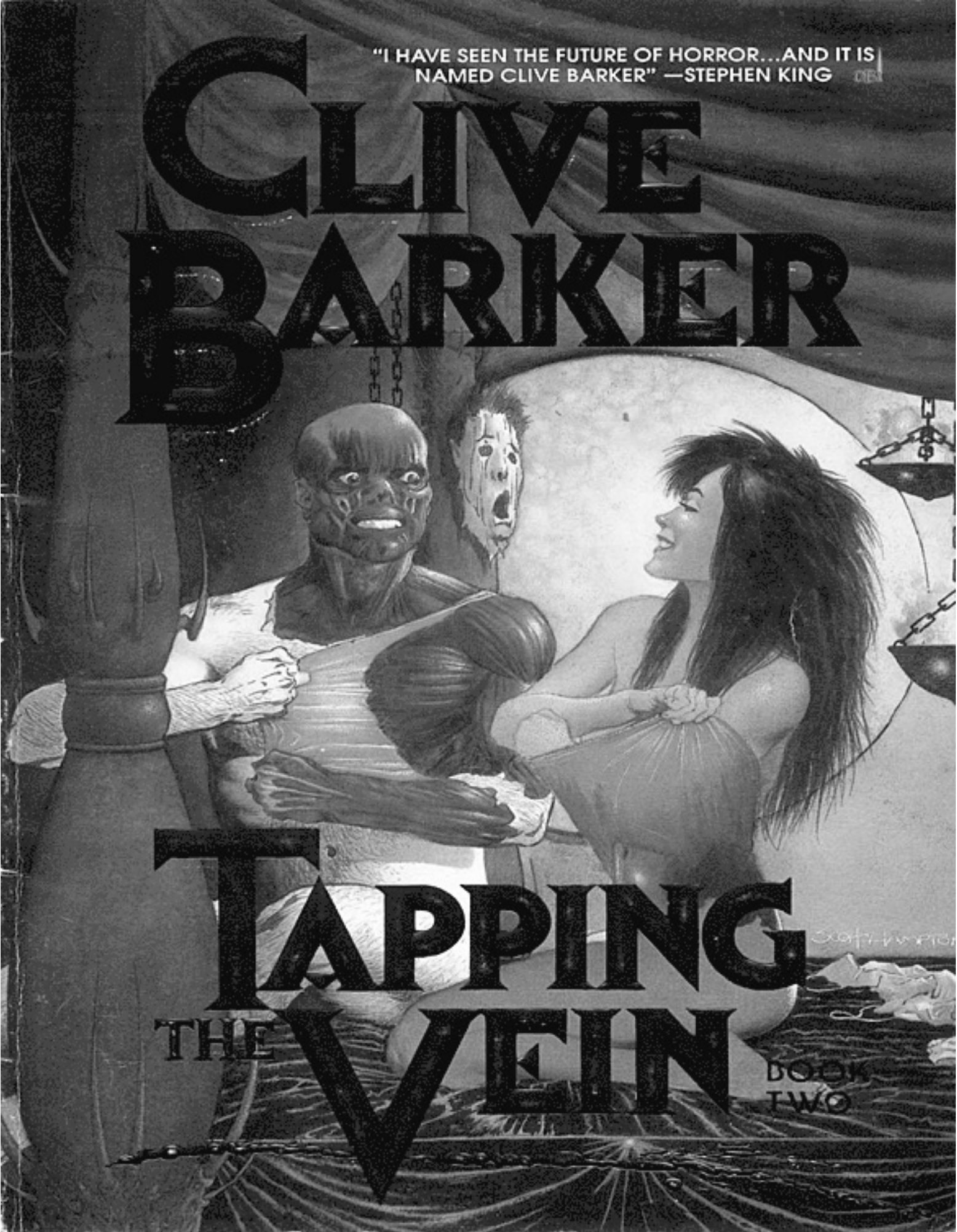
VISIT…

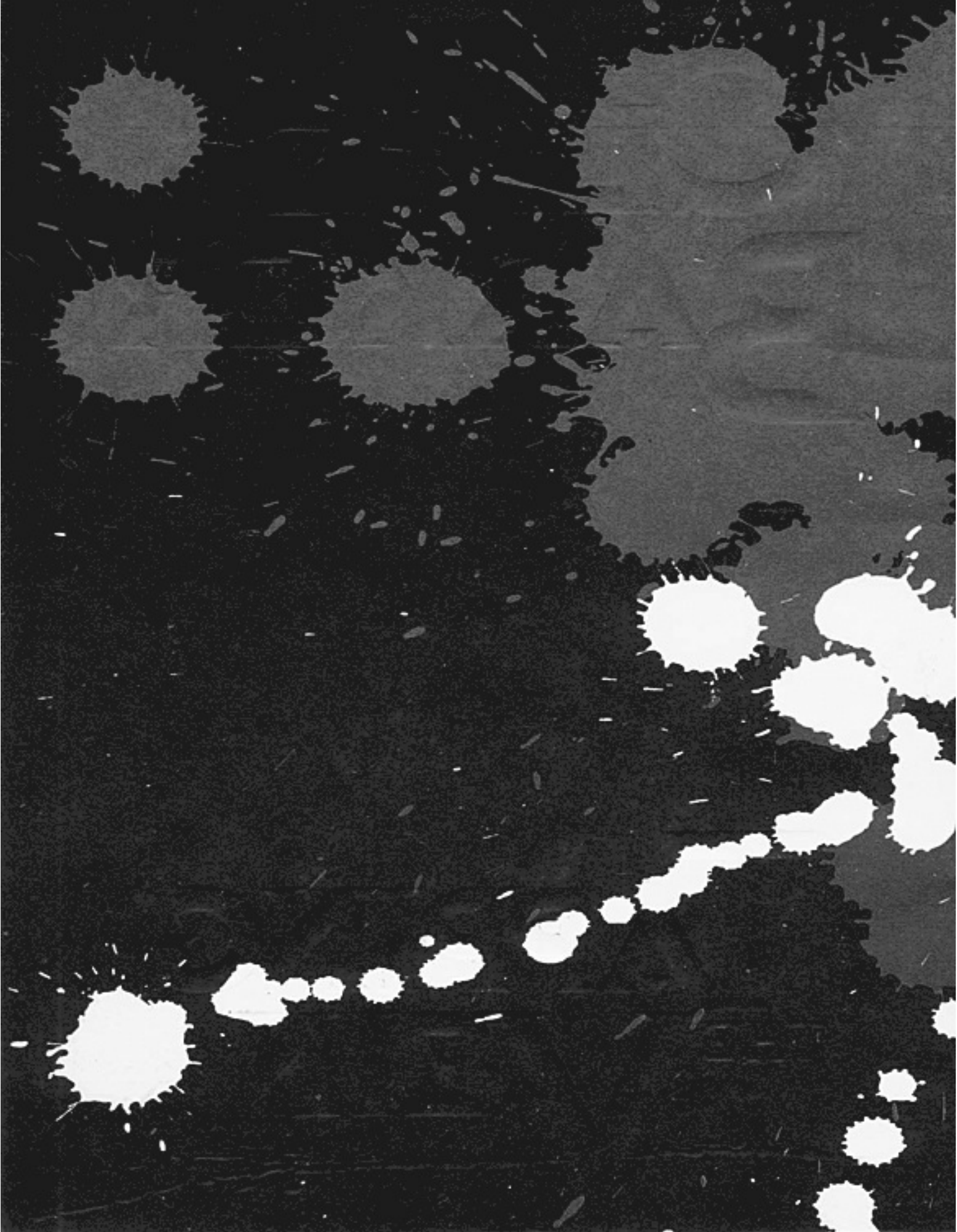
"I HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE OF HORROR...AND IT IS NAMED CLIVE BARKER" —STEPHEN KING

CLIVE BARKER



TAPPING THE VEIN

BOOK TWO



TAPPING
VEIN
TITAN BOOKS

PRODUCED BY ECLIPSE BOOKS (USA):

DEAN MULLANEY
Publisher

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Tapping The Vein Book Two
ISBN 1-85286-217-3
Published by Titan Books,
58 St. Giles High Street, London WC2 8LH.
First British edition: November 1989
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Published by arrangement with Eclipse Books, USA.
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Skins of the Fathers

Illustrated by Klaus Janson
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In the Hills, the Cities

Illustrated by John Bolton
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and Fred Burke
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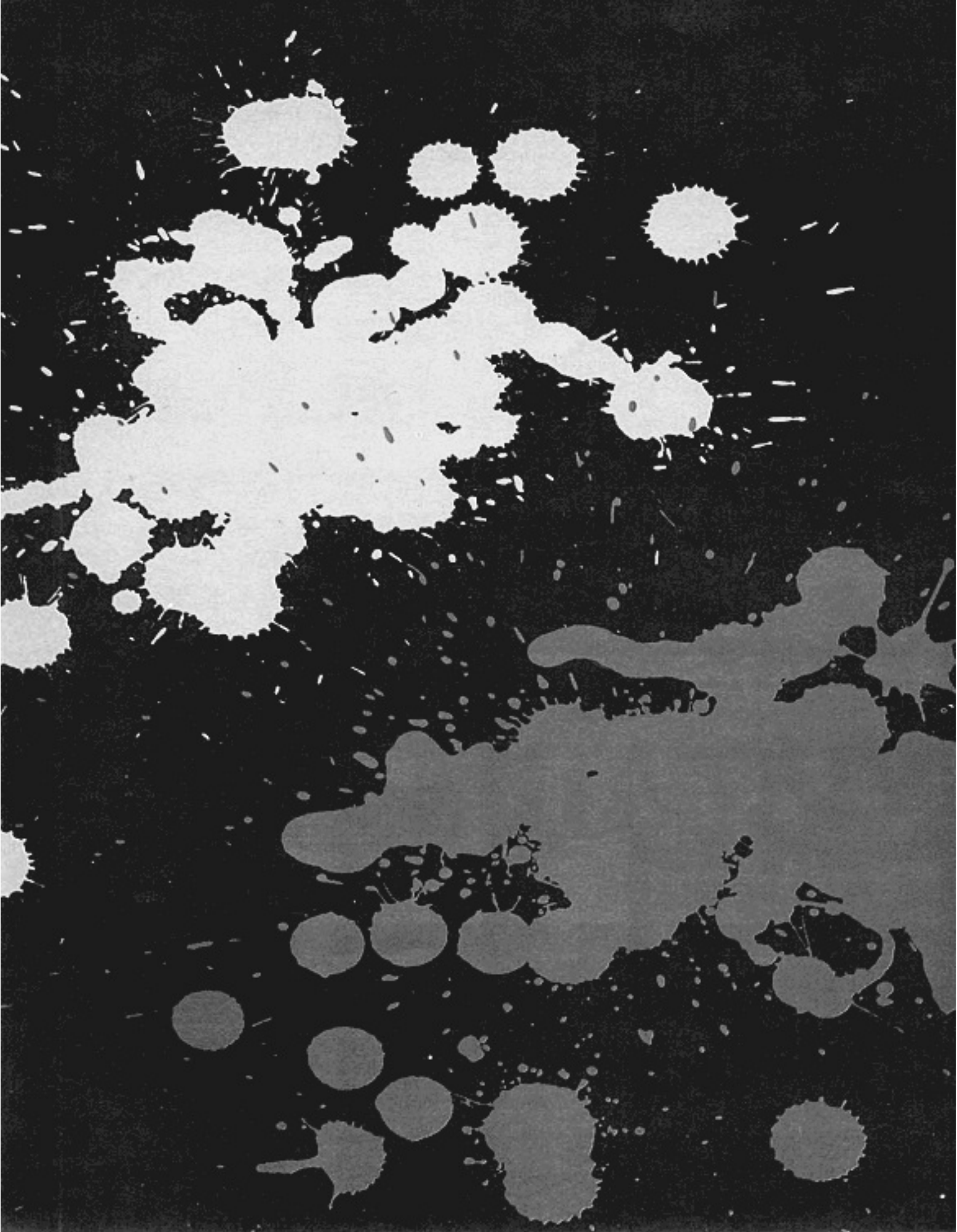


RRRRrrrr

JESUS!

THE CAR COUGHED AND CHOKED AND DIED.

DAVIDSON WAS SUDDENLY AWARE OF THE WIND ON THE DESERT ROAD, AS IT KEENED AT THE WINDOWS OF HIS MUSTANG. HE TRIED TO REVIVE THE ENGINE, BUT IT REFUSED LIFE.

HE THREW UP THE HOOD OF THE CAR AND PEERED HOPELESSLY INSIDE, REGRETTING HIS LACK OF MECHANICAL KNOW-HOW.

WHY DON'T THEY MAKE THE DAMN THINGS FOOLPROOF?!

IN EVERY DIRECTION, HOT AIR, HOT ROCK, HOT SAND.

THIS WAS ARIZONA.

IN FRONT AND BEHIND, THE BAKING DUST HIGHWAY STRETCHED UNSWERVINGLY TO THE PALE HORIZON. IF HE NARROWED HIS EYES HE COULD JUST MAKE OUT THE MOUNTAINS, BUT AS SOON AS HE ATTEMPTED TO FIX HIS FOCUS, THEY WERE EATEN UP BY THE HEAT-HAZE.

ALREADY THE SUN WAS CORRODING THE TOP OF HIS HEAD, WHERE HIS BLOND HAIR WAS THINNING.

THEN HE HEARD THE MUSIC.

IT WAS SO FAR OFF IT SOUNDED LIKE A WHISTLING IN HIS EARS AT FIRST, BUT IT BECAME LOUDER.

LIKE THE WIND THROUGH TELEPHONE LINES, A SOURCELESS, RHYTHMLESS, HEARTLESS AIR-WAVE PLUCKING AT THE HAIRS ON THE BACK OF HIS NECK AND TELLING THEM TO STAND. HE TRIED TO IGNORE IT, BUT IT WOULDN'T GO AWAY.

ONLY AS HE SCANNED THE DESERT TO THE SOUTHEAST DID A LINE OF TINY FIGURES BECOME VISIBLE TO HIM, WALKING, OR SKIPPING, OR DANCING AT THE FURTHEST EDGE OF HIS SIGHT; LIQUID IN THE HEAT OFF THE EARTH. THE PROCESSION, IF THAT WAS ITS NATURE, WAS LONG, AND MAKING ITS WAY ACROSS THE DESERT PARALLEL TO THE HIGHWAY.

THEIR PATHS WOULD NOT CROSS.

HE NEEDED HELP! NO DOUBT OF IT. BUT ALREADY THEY WERE RECEDING FROM HIM. HE BROKE INTO A RUN.

OVER THE THUNDER OF HIS BLOOD, HE COULD HEAR THE MUSIC MORE LOUDLY NOW. THERE WAS NO MELODY APPARENT, BUT A CONSTANT RISING AND FALLING OF MANY INSTRUMENTS: HOWLS AND HUMMINGS, WHISTLINGS, DRUMMINGS AND ROARINGS.

THE HEAD OF THE PROCESSION HAD NOW DISAPPEARED, RECEIVED INTO DISTANCE, BUT THE CELEBRANTS (IF THAT THEY WERE) STILL PARADED PAST. HE CHANGED DIRECTION A LITTLE, TO HEAD THEM OFF, GLANCING OVER HIS SHOULDER BRIEFLY TO CHECK HIS WAY BACK.

WITH A STOMACH-CHURNING SENSE OF LONELINESS HE SAW HIS VEHICLE, AS SMALL AS A BEETLE ON THE ROAD BEHIND HIM, SITTING WEIGHED DOWN BY A BOILING SKY.

HE BEGAN TO SEE THE PROCESSION MORE CLEARLY. THOUGH ITS LEADERS WERE WELL OUT OF SIGHT: IT WAS, HE BEGAN TO BELIEVE, A CARNIVAL OF SOME SORT, EXTRAORDINARY AS THAT SEEMED OUT HERE IN THE MIDDLE OF GOD'S NOWHERE.

THE DANCERS WORE HEADDRESSES AND MASKS THAT TOTTERED WELL ABOVE HUMAN HEIGHT — THERE WAS THE FLUTTER OF BRIGHTLY COLORED FEATHERS, AND STREAMERS COILING IN THE AIR BEHIND THEM.

WHATEVER THE REASON FOR THE CELEBRATION THEY REELED LIKE DRUNKARDS, LOPING ONE MOMENT, LEAPING THE NEXT, SQUIRMING, SOME OF THEM, ON THE GROUND, BELLIES TO THE HOT SAND.

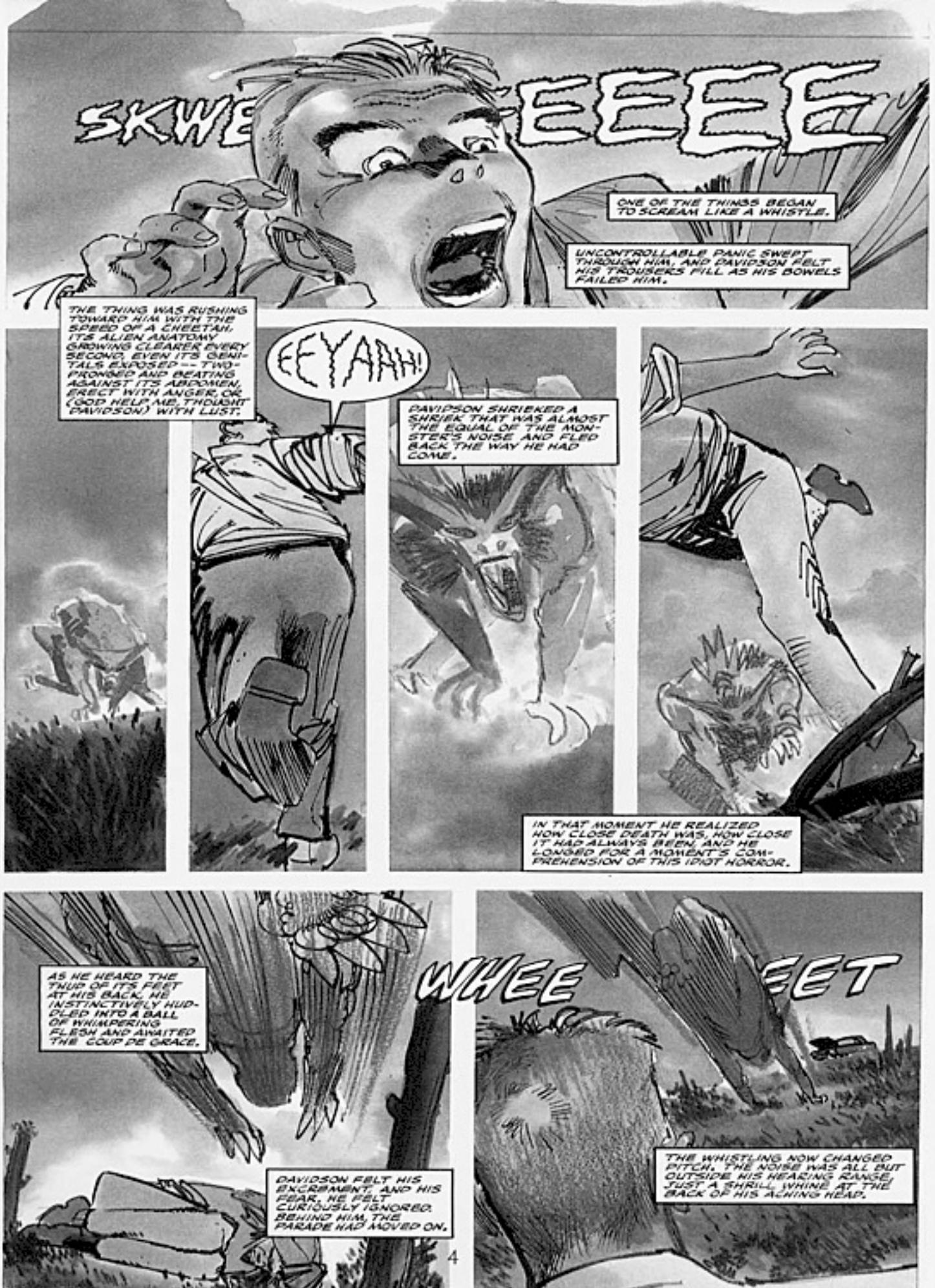
DAVIDSON'S LUNGS WERE TORN WITH EXHAUSTION, AND IT WAS CLEAR HE WAS LOSING THE PURSUIT.
STOP!

AT FIRST THERE WAS NO RESPONSE. THEN, THROUGH THE SLITS OF HIS EYES, HE THOUGHT HE SAW ONE OR TWO OF THE REVELLERS HALT.

SOME OF THE INSTRUMENTS HAD DIED AWAY, AS THOUGH WORD OF HIS PRESENCE WAS SPREADING AMONG THEM. THEY'D DEFINITELY SEEN HIM, NO DOUBT OF THAT.
HE WALKED ON, FASTER NOW, AND OUT OF THE HAZE, THE DETAILS OF THE PROCESSION BEGAN TO COME CLEAR.

MY JESUS!
FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HIS THIRTY-SIX GODLESS YEARS, THE WORDS WERE A TRUE PRAYER.

HE STOOD OFF HALF A MILE FROM THEM, BUT THERE WAS NO MISTAKING WHAT HE SAW. HIS ACHING EYES KNEW PAPIER-MACHE FROM FLESH, ILLUSION FROM MISSHAPEN REALITY.
AROOOOo.
SKIN OF THE FATHERS
ILLUSTRATED BY KLAUS JANSON


SKWEEEEEE
ONE OF THE THINGS BEGAN TO SCREAM LIKE A WHISTLE.
UNCONTROLLABLE PANIC SWEPT THROUGH HIM, AND DAVIDSON FELT HIS TROUSERS FILL AS HIS BOWELS FAILED HIM.
THE THING WAS RUSHING TOWARD HIM WITH THE SPEED OF A CHEETAH, ITS ALIEN ANATOMY GROWING CLEARER EVERY SECOND, EVEN ITS GENITALS EXPOSED -- TWO-PRONGED AND BEATING AGAINST ITS ABDOMEN, ERECT WITH ANGER, OR, (GOD HELP ME, THOUGHT DAVIDSON) WITH LUST.
EEYAAH!
DAVIDSON SHRIEKED A SHRIEK THAT WAS ALMOST THE EQUAL OF THE MONSTER'S NOISE AND FLED BACK THE WAY HE HAD COME.
IN THAT MOMENT HE REALIZED HOW CLOSE DEATH WAS, HOW CLOSE IT HAD ALWAYS BEEN, AND HE LONGED FOR A MOMENT'S COMPREHENSION OF THIS IDIOT HORROR.
AS HE HEARD THE THUD OF ITS FEET AT HIS BACK, HE INSTINCTIVELY HUDDLED INTO A BALL OF WHIMPERING FLESH AND AWAITED THE COUP DE GRACE.
DAVIDSON FELT HIS EXCREMENT, AND HIS FEAR. HE FELT CURIOUSLY IGNORED. BEHIND HIM, THE PARADE HAD MOVED ON.
WHEE EET
THE WHISTLING NOW CHANGED PITCH. THE NOISE WAS ALL BUT OUTSIDE HIS HEARING RANGE, JUST A SHRILL WHINE AT THE BACK OF HIS ACHING HEAD.

SWWEEEEEEEE
ITS HEAD WAS THROWN BACK IN A KIND OF ECSTASY, ITS ERECTION PLAINER THAN EVER, A FINAL SWOOP IN ITS VOICE TAKING THE WHISTLE OUT OF HUMAN HEARING.
TO HIS NOSTRILS DRIFTED THE UNMISTAKABLE STENCH OF GASOLINE.
DAVIDSON BRIEFLY WONDERED WHAT HE COULD POSSIBLY PUT ON THE INSURANCE FORM.
PFFOOOM!
THE THING DID NOT CALL OUT, OR IF IT DID, ITS AGONIES WERE BEYOND HEARING.
THE SHIT ON DAVIDSON'S LEGS WAS ALREADY DRY IN THE HEAT, THE MUSIC HAD GONE ENTIRELY, AS HAD THE PROCESSION.
HE WAS BLANK-EYED WHEN THE NEXT VEHICLE ALONG THE HIGHWAY STOPPED TO PICK HIM UP.

MILES AWAY, SHERIFF JOSH PACKARD STARED IN DISBELIEF AT THE CLAW PRINTS ON THE GROUND AT HIS FEET. THEY WERE ETCHED IN SLOWLY SOLIDIFYING FAT; THE LIQUID FLESH OF THE DYING MONSTER THAT HAD RUN THROUGH THE MAIN STREET (THE ONLY STREET) OF WELCOME MINUTES AGO.

THE NORMAL BUSINESS OF WELCOME, THE TRADING, THE DEBATING, THE HOW DO YOU DO'S HAD HALTED.
THE STENCH WAS SOMETHING BETWEEN OVER-COOKED FISH AND AN EXHUMATION, AND IT OFFENDED PACKARD. THIS WAS HIS TOWN, OVERLOOKED BY HIM, PROTECTED BY HIM. THE INTRUSION OF THIS FIREBALL WAS NOT LOOKED UPON KINDLY.
ONE OR TWO NAUSEOUS INDIVIDUALS HAD BEEN RECEIVED INTO THE LOBBY OF THE HOTEL, WHILE THE SMELL OF FRICASSEED FLESH THICKENED THE GOOD DESERT AIR OF THE TOWN.

THIS WAS A MONSTER: NO DOUBT OF IT.
ONCE EVERY GENERATION OR SO, HIS FATHER HAD TOLD HIM, THE DESERT SPAT OUT ITS DEMONS AND LET THEM LOOSE AWHILE. 'TIL NOW, HE'D NEVER BELIEVED IT.

CHUD!
THE CROWD, STILL LINGERING IN THE SAFETY OF THE DOORWAYS, COOED WITH ADMIRATION AT HIS BRAVERY. THAT KICK ALONE WOULD BE WORTH A NIGHT OF DRINKS, PERHAPS EVEN A WOMAN.

WITH THE DISPASSIONATE GAZE OF A PROFESSIONAL DEMON-KICKER, PACKARD SCRUTINIZED THE TANGLED MESS.
IT WAS QUITE DEAD, THAT WAS OBVIOUS.

GET A CAMERA OUT HERE, JEDEDIAH!
PACKARD IMPRESSED EVEN HIMSELF.

HIS GLOVES WOULD BE RUINED, BUT IT WAS WORTH THE INCONVENIENCE FOR THE GOOD THIS GESTURE WOULD BE DOING FOR HIS PUBLIC IMAGE.
WHAT WE NEED IS A PICTURE OF THIS HERE BEAUTY.
HE COULD ALMOST FEEL THE ADMIRING LOOKS AS HE TOUCHED THE FLESH, AND BEGAN TO SHAKE A LIMB LOOSE FROM THE HEAD OF THE MONSTER.
GRRRR
BUT IT STILL HAD LIFE IN IT. THIS THING FROM THE UNDERWORLD!
CRUNCH!
NOOOO
BLAM
ELEANOR KOOKER DROPPED THE BARREL OF THE SHOTGUN SHE HAD JUST FIRED, AND GRUNTED WITH SATISFACTION.
YOUR HAND'S GONE.
MONSTERS, PACKARD REMEMBERED HIS FATHER TELLING HIM, NEVER DIE. HE'D REMEMBERED TOO LATE, AND NOW HE'D SACRIFICED HIS HAND, HIS DRINKING, SEXING HAND.
A WAVE OF NOSTALGIA FOR LOST YEARS WITH THOSE FINGERS WASHED OVER HIM, WHILE DOTS BURST INTO DARKNESS BEFORE HIS EYES.

THE SHACK AT THE BACK OF THE HOUSE -- FAR FROM THE GOINGS-ON IN WELCOME -- WAS LUCY'S REFUGE, AND ALWAYS HAD BEEN. WHEN EUGENE CAME BACK DRUNK FROM WELCOME, OR A SUDDEN FURY TOOK HIM BECAUSE THE STEW WAS COLD, LUCY RETIRED INTO THE SHACK WHERE SHE COULD WEEP IN PEACE.
THERE WAS NO PITY TO BE HAD IN LUCY'S LIFE. NONE FROM EUGENE CERTAINLY, AND PRECIOUS LITTLE TIME TO PITY HERSELF.

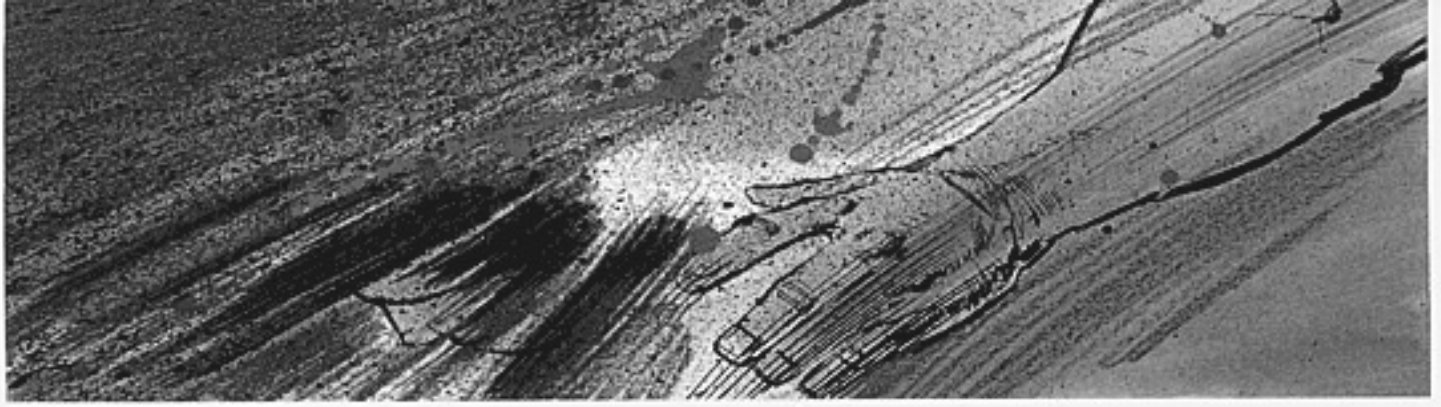
TODAY, THE OLD SOURCE OF IRRITATION HAD GOT EUGENE INTO A RAGE --
--THE CHILD.
THE NURTURED AND CAREFULLY CULTIVATED CHILD OF THEIR LOVE, NAMED AFTER THE BROTHER OF MOSES... AARON, WHICH MEANT "EXALTED ONE."

A SWEET BOY, THE PRETTIEST BOY IN THE WHOLE TERRITORY; FIVE YEARS OLD AND ALREADY AS CHARMING AND POLITE AS ANY EAST COAST MOMMA COULD WISH TO RAISE.
AARON.
LUCY'S PRIDE AND JOY, A CHILD FIT TO BLOW BUBBLES IN A PICTURE BOOK, FIT TO DANCE, FIT TO CHARM THE DEVIL HIMSELF.

THAT WAS EUGENE'S OBJECTION.
THAT FUCKING CHILD'S NO MORE A BOY THAN YOU ARE. HE'S NOT EVEN A HALF-BOY. HE'S ONLY FIT FOR PUTTING IN FANCY SHOES AND SELLING PERFUME, OR A PREACHER -- HE'S FIT FOR A PREACHER.

YOU'RE A SHAME TO YOUR FATHER.
YOU HEAR ME, BOY?
EUGENE LOOKED AWAY. THE BOY'S BIG EYES MADE HIM SICK TO HIS STOMACH, MORE LIKE A DOG'S EYES THAN ANYTHING HUMAN.

I WANT HIM OUT OF THIS HOUSE.
WHAT'S HE DONE?
HE DOESN'T NEED TO DO A THING. IT'S SUFFICIENT HE'S THE WAY HE IS. THEY LAUGH AT ME, BECAUSE OF HIM.
IF THEY LAUGH, THEY DON'T LAUGH AT THE BOY. THEY LAUGH AT YOU. TALKING ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE SEEN AND WHAT YOU'RE SCARED OF --



AARON, COME WITH ME.
YOU LET THE BASTARD ALONE.
AARON.
MAMA.

YOU LISTEN TO YOUR FATHER, BOY.
YES--
'YES, SIR' WE SAY TO OUR FATHER, DON'T WE? WE SAY, 'YES, SIR.'

...YES, SIR...
HE STAYS WITH ME, WOMAN. YOU'RE NOT TAKING HIM OUT INTO THAT FUCKING SHACK ONE MORE TIME. HE STAYS WITH HIS FATHER.

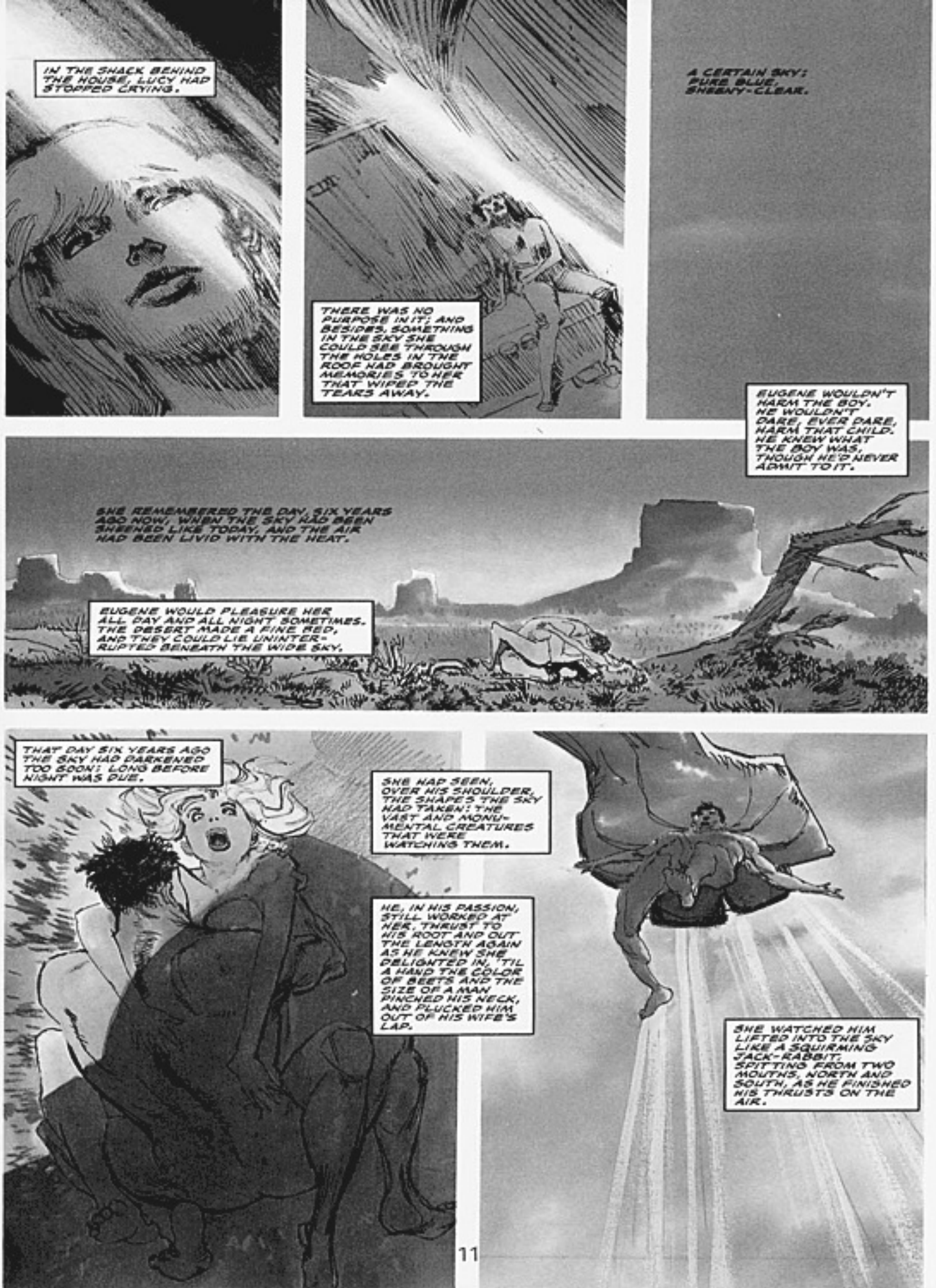
IF YOU HARM HIM--
I'M HIS FATHER, WOMAN. WHAT-- DO YOU THINK I'D HARM MY OWN FLESH AND BLOOD?
LUCY KNEW HER HUSBAND, AND HE WAS CLOSE TO AN OUTBURST THAT WOULD BE UNCONTROLLABLE. SHE NO LONGER CARED FOR HERSELF-- SHE'D HAD HER JOYS-- BUT THE BOY WAS SO VULNERABLE.

GET OUT OF OUR SIGHT, WOMAN, WHY DON'T YOU? THE BOY AND I WANT TO BE ALONE, DON'T WE?
DON'T WE?
YES, PAPA.

'YES, PAPA, OH YES INDEED, PAPA.'

LUCY RETIRED INTO THE COOL DARKNESS OF THE SHACK, WHERE SHE PRAYED FOR AARON, NAMED AFTER THE BROTHER OF MOSES. AARON, WHOSE NAME MEANT "EXALTED ONE."
SHE WONDERED HOW LONG HE COULD SURVIVE THE BRUTALITIES THE FUTURE WOULD PROVIDE.

BUT THE BOY WASN'T AFRAID. THE WHIPPING THAT WOULD BE METED OUT TO HIM WOULD PAIN HIM, BUT THIS WAS NOT TRUE FEAR.
YOU'RE SICKLY, LAD. WEAK AND SICKLY LIKE A RUNTY HOG.
IF I WAS A FARMER, AND YOU WERE A HOG, YOU KNOW WHAT I'D DO?
NO, PAPA, WHAT WOULD YOU DO?
SKRRRKk
WHY, I'D CUT YOU UP AND FEED YOU TO THE REST OF THE LITTER. NOTHING A HOG LIKES BETTER TO EAT THAN HOG-MEAT. HOW'D YOU LIKE THAT?
NO, PAPA.
YOU WOULDN'T LIKE THAT?
NO THANK YOU, PAPA.
WELL, I'D LIKE TO SEE THAT, AARON. I'D LIKE TO SEE WHAT YOU'D DO IF I WAS TO OPEN YOU UP AND HAVE A LOOK INSIDE YOU.
THERE WAS A NEW VIOLENCE IN HIS FATHER'S GAMES WHICH AARON COULDN'T UNDERSTAND: NEW THREATS; NEW INTIMACY.
UNCOMFORTABLE AS HE WAS, THE BOY KNEW THE REAL FEAR WAS FELT NOT BY HIM, BUT BY HIS FATHER. FEAR WAS EUGENE'S BIRTHRIGHT; JUST AS IT WAS AARON'S TO WATCH, AND WAIT, AND SUFFER, UNTIL THE MOMENT CAME.
HE KNEW (WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING HOW OR WHY) THAT HE WOULD BE AN INSTRUMENT IN THE DESTRUCTION OF HIS FATHER. MAYBE MORE THAN AN INSTRUMENT.
ANGER BUBBLED IN EUGENE. THE BOY WAS HIS RUIN. SOMEHOW HE'D KILLED THE GOOD LIFE THEY'D LIVED BEFORE HE WAS BORN, AS SURELY AS IF HE'D SHOT HIS PARENTS DEAD.
I COULD KILL YOU, BOY. WHAT DO YOU SAY TO THAT?
NOTHING, SIR.
WHY?
YOU SHOULD SAY 'THANK YOU, SIR.'
YES, SIR.
WHY, BOY? 'CAUSE THIS LIFE'S NOT WORTH WHAT A HOG CAN SHIT, AND I'D BE DOING YOU A LOVING SERVICE, AS A FATHER SHOULD A SON.


IN THE SHACK BEHIND THE HOUSE, LUCY HAD STOPPED CRYING.
THERE WAS NO PURPOSE IN IT; AND BESIDES, SOMETHING IN THE SKY SHE COULD SEE THROUGH THE HOLES IN THE ROOF HAD BROUGHT MEMORIES TO HER THAT WIPED THE TEARS AWAY.
A CERTAIN SKY: PURE BLUE, SHEENY-CLEAR.
EUGENE WOULDN'T HARM THE BOY. HE WOULDN'T DARE, EVER DARE, HARM THAT CHILD. HE KNEW WHAT THE BOY WAS, THOUGH HE'D NEVER ADMIT TO IT.
SHE REMEMBERED THE DAY, SIX YEARS AGO NOW, WHEN THE SKY HAD BEEN SHEENED LIKE TODAY, AND THE AIR HAD BEEN LIVID WITH THE HEAT.
EUGENE WOULD PLEASURE HER ALL DAY AND ALL NIGHT SOMETIMES. THE DESERT MADE A FINE BED, AND THEY COULD LIE UNINTERRUPTED BENEATH THE WIDE SKY.
THAT DAY SIX YEARS AGO THE SKY HAD DARKENED TOO SOON: LONG BEFORE NIGHT WAS DUE.
SHE HAD SEEN, OVER HIS SHOULDER, THE SHAPES THE SKY HAD TAKEN: THE VAST AND MONUMENTAL CREATURES THAT WERE WATCHING THEM.
HE, IN HIS PASSION, STILL WORKED AT HER, THRUST TO HIS ROOT AND OUT THE LENGTH AGAIN AS HE KNEW SHE DELIGHTED IN, 'TIL A HAND THE COLOR OF BEETS AND THE SIZE OF A MAN PINCHED HIS NECK, AND PLUCKED HIM OUT OF HIS WIFE'S LAP.
SHE WATCHED HIM LIFTED INTO THE SKY LIKE A SQUIRMING JACK-RABBIT, SPITTING FROM TWO MOUTHS, NORTH AND SOUTH, AS HE FINISHED HIS THRUSTS ON THE AIR.

THEN HIS EYES OPENED FOR A MOMENT; AND HE SAW HIS WIFE TWENTY FEET BELOW HIM, STILL BARE, STILL SPREAD BUTTERFLY WIDE, WITH MONSTERS ON EVERY SIDE. CASUALLY, WITHOUT MALICE, THEY THREW HIM AWAY, OUT OF THEIR RING OF ADMIRATION, AND OUT OF HER SIGHT.

SHE REMEMBERED SO WELL THE HOUR THAT FOLLOWED; THE EMBRACES OF THE MONSTERS. NOT FOUL IN ANY WAY; NOT GROSS OR HARMFUL, NEVER LESS THAN LOVING.

EVEN THE MACHINERIES OF REPRODUCTION THAT THEY PIERCED HER WITH, ONE AFTER THE OTHER, WERE NOT PAINFUL; THOUGH SOME WERE AS LARGE AS EUGENE'S FISTED ARM, AND HARD AS BONE.

HOW MANY OF THOSE STRANGERS TOOK HER THAT AFTERNOON — THREE, FOUR, FIVE? MINGLING THEIR SEMEN IN HER BODY, FONDLY TEASING JOY FROM HER WITH THEIR PATIENT THRUSTS.

WHEN THEY WENT AWAY, AND HER SKIN WAS TOUCHED WITH SUNLIGHT AGAIN, SHE FELT, THOUGH ON REFLECTION IT SEEMED SHAMEFUL, A LOSS; AS THOUGH THE ZENITH OF HER LIFE WAS PASSED, AND THE REST OF HER DAYS WOULD BE A COLD RIDE DOWN TO DEATH.
SHE HOPED, AND HOPE IT WAS, THAT THERE WOULD BE FRUIT FROM THE SEED OF THAT DAY'S LOVE, AND IT WOULD BE A KEEPSAKE OF HER JOY.

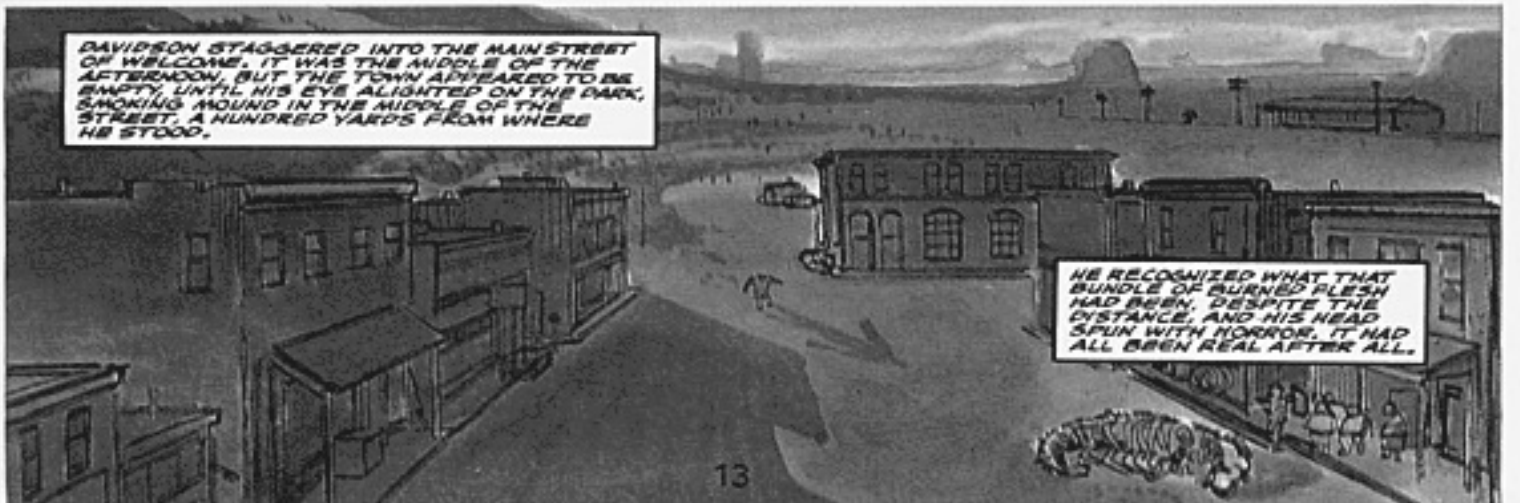
SPEAK, BOY!
WHAT SHALL I SAY?
YES, FATHER.
AM I YOUR FATHER OR NOT?!

LIAR!

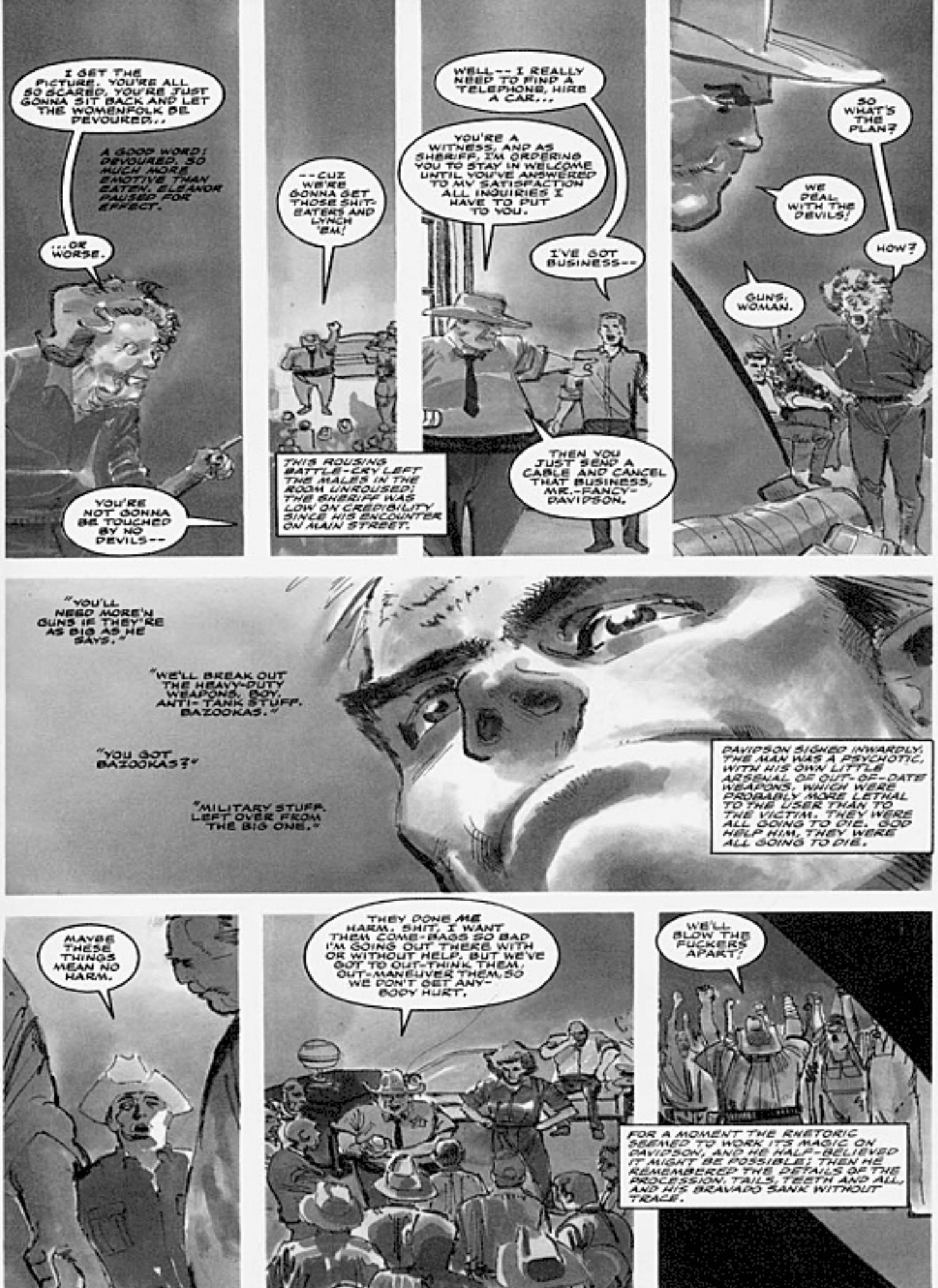
AARON MADE NO SOUND.
LIAR!

AS HIS SMALL UNCALLOUSED PALMS FLATTENED AGAINST THE KITCHEN TILES, HE FELT SOMETHING THROUGH THE FLOOR.
THERE WAS MUSIC IN THE GROUND.

THERE WOULD BE MORE BLOWS TO COME, THIS BOY THOUGHT, MORE PAIN, MORE BLOOD. BUT IT WAS BEARABLE! AND THE MUSIC WAS A PROMISE, AFTER A LONG WAIT, OF AN END TO BLOWS ONCE AND FOR ALL.


DAVIDSON STAGGERED INTO THE MAIN STREET OF WELCOME. IT WAS THE MIDDLE OF THE AFTERNOON, BUT THE TOWN APPEARED TO BE EMPTY, UNTIL HIS EYE ALIGHTED ON THE DARK, SMOKING MOUND IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STREET, A HUNDRED YARDS FROM WHERE HE STOOD.
HE RECOGNIZED WHAT THAT BUNDLE OF BURNED FLESH HAD BEEN, DESPITE THE DISTANCE, AND HIS HEAD SPUN WITH HORROR. IT HAD ALL BEEN REAL AFTER ALL.

HE STUMBLED ON A COUPLE MORE STEPS, FIGHTING THE DIZZINESS AND LOSING, UNTIL HE FELT HIMSELF SUPPORTED BY STRONG ARMS, AND HEARD, THROUGH A FUZZ OF HEAD-NOISES, REASSURING WORDS BEING SPOKEN TO HIM. THEY MADE NO SENSE, BUT AT LEAST THEY WERE SOFT AND HUMAN: HE COULD GIVE UP ANY PRETENSE TO CONSCIOUSNESS.
IT SEEMED THERE WAS ONLY A MOMENT OF RESPITE BEFORE THE WORLD CAME BACK INTO VIEW AGAIN, AS ODIOUS AS EVER.
HE'LL SURVIVE.
DRINK, THEN TELL US WHAT YOU GOT TO TELL.
THE ROOM WAS FILLED WITH PEOPLE! IT WAS AS THOUGH ALL OF WELZOME WAS PRESSING INTO THE KOOKER FRONT PARLOR. QUITE AN AUDIENCE! BUT THEN, IT WAS QUITE A TALE. LOOSENED BY THE WHISKY, HE BEGAN TO TELL IT AS BEST HE COULD, WITHOUT EMBELLISHMENT, JUST LETTING THE WORDS COME...
IN RETURN, ELEANOR RELATED THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF SHERIFF PACKARD'S "ACCIDENT."
IT'D NOT THE ONLY DEVIL OUT THERE.
SO'S YOU SAY.
MY PAPA SAID SO, AND I BELIEVE, SURE AS HELL I BELIEVE IT!
THEN WE'D BEST DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT!
WHAT'S TO BE DONE ABOUT THE LIKES OF A THING THAT EATS AUTOMOBILES?
I THINK WE SHOULD LIE LOW AND LET 'EM PASS.

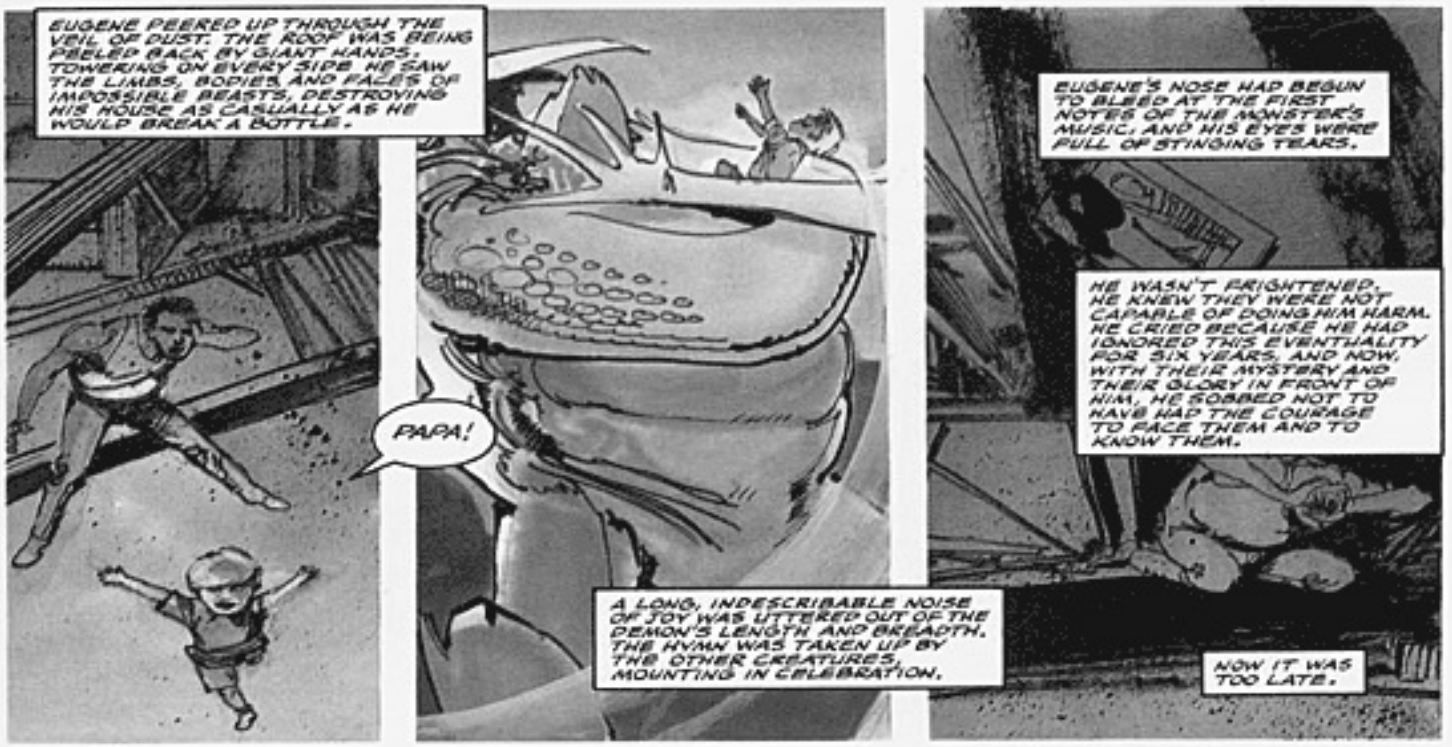

I GET THE PICTURE. YOU'RE ALL SO SCARED, YOU'RE JUST GONNA SIT BACK AND LET THE WOMENFOLK BE PEVOURED...
A GOOD WORD: DEVOURED. SO MUCH MORE EMOTIVE THAN EATEN. ELEANOR PAUSED FOR EFFECT.
...OR WORSE.
YOU'RE NOT GONNA BE TOUCHED BY NO DEVILS--
--CUZ WE'RE GONNA GET THOSE SHIT-EATERS AND LYNCH 'EM!
THIS ROUSING BATTLE-CRY LEFT THE MALES IN THE ROOM UNROUSED: THE SHERIFF WAS LOW ON CREDIBILITY SINCE HIS ENCOUNTER ON MAIN STREET.
WELL-- I REALLY NEED TO FIND A TELEPHONE, HIRE A CAR...
YOU'RE A WITNESS, AND AS SHERIFF, I'M ORDERING YOU TO STAY IN WELCOME UNTIL YOU'VE ANSWERED TO MY SATISFACTION ALL INQUIRIES I HAVE TO PUT TO YOU.
I'VE GOT BUSINESS--
THEN YOU JUST SEND A CABLE AND CANCEL THAT BUSINESS, MR.-FANCY-DAVIDSON.
SO WHAT'S THE PLAN?
WE DEAL WITH THE DEVILS!
HOW?
GUNS, WOMAN.
"YOU'LL NEED MORE'N GUNS IF THEY'RE AS BIG AS HE SAYS."
"WE'LL BREAK OUT THE HEAVY-DUTY WEAPONS, BOY. ANTI-TANK STUFF. BAZOOKAS."
"YOU GOT BAZOOKAS?"
"MILITARY STUFF. LEFT OVER FROM THE BIG ONE."
DAVIDSON SIGHED INWARDLY. THE MAN WAS A PSYCHOTIC, WITH HIS OWN LITTLE ARSENAL OF OUT-OF-DATE WEAPONS, WHICH WERE PROBABLY MORE LETHAL TO THE USER THAN TO THE VICTIM. THEY WERE ALL GOING TO DIE. GOD HELP HIM, THEY WERE ALL GOING TO DIE.
MAYBE THESE THINGS MEAN NO HARM.
THEY DONE *ME* HARM. SHIT, I WANT THEM COME-BACS SO BAD I'M GOING OUT THERE WITH OR WITHOUT HELP. BUT WE'VE GOT TO OUT-THINK THEM, OUT-MANEUVER THEM, SO WE DON'T GET ANY-BODY HURT.
WE'LL BLOW THE FUCKERS APART!
FOR A MOMENT THE RHETORIC SEEMED TO WORK ITS MAGIC ON DAVIDSON, AND HE HALF-BELIEVED IT MIGHT BE POSSIBLE; THEN HE REMEMBERED THE DETAILS OF THE PROCESSION. TAILS, TEETH AND ALL, AND HIS BRAVADO SANK WITHOUT TRACE.

AND WHAT OF THE DEMONS? THEY HAD COME UPON THE HOUSE QUIETLY, NOT INTENDING TO CREEP, JUST SO GENTLE WITH THEIR TREAD NOBODY HEARD THEM.
AARON DIDN'T NEED TO LOOK UP TO SEE THEM COMING ACROSS THE SAND; THEIR APPROACH SOUNDED IN HIS VEINS.
WHAROOOOOSHH
WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE WINDOW, BOY?
BUT AARON ONLY HEARD ONE OF HIS TRUE FATHER'S VOICES ECLIPSE EUGENE'S MUMBLINGS. HIS VOICE SOUNDED LIKE A RUSH OF WATER, COUNTER-POINTED BY SOFT, PIPING SIGHS.
IT WAS AN EAGER VOICE, A LOVING VOICE.
ALL AT ONCE EUGENE SEEMED TO UNDERSTAND.
PAPA!
EUGENE TOOK THE CRY AS ADDRESSED TO HIMSELF, BUT AARON'S TRUE FATHER ALSO HEARD THE BOY'S VOICE. HIS ANSWERING CALL WAS THREADED WITH PIERCING NOTES OF CONCERN.

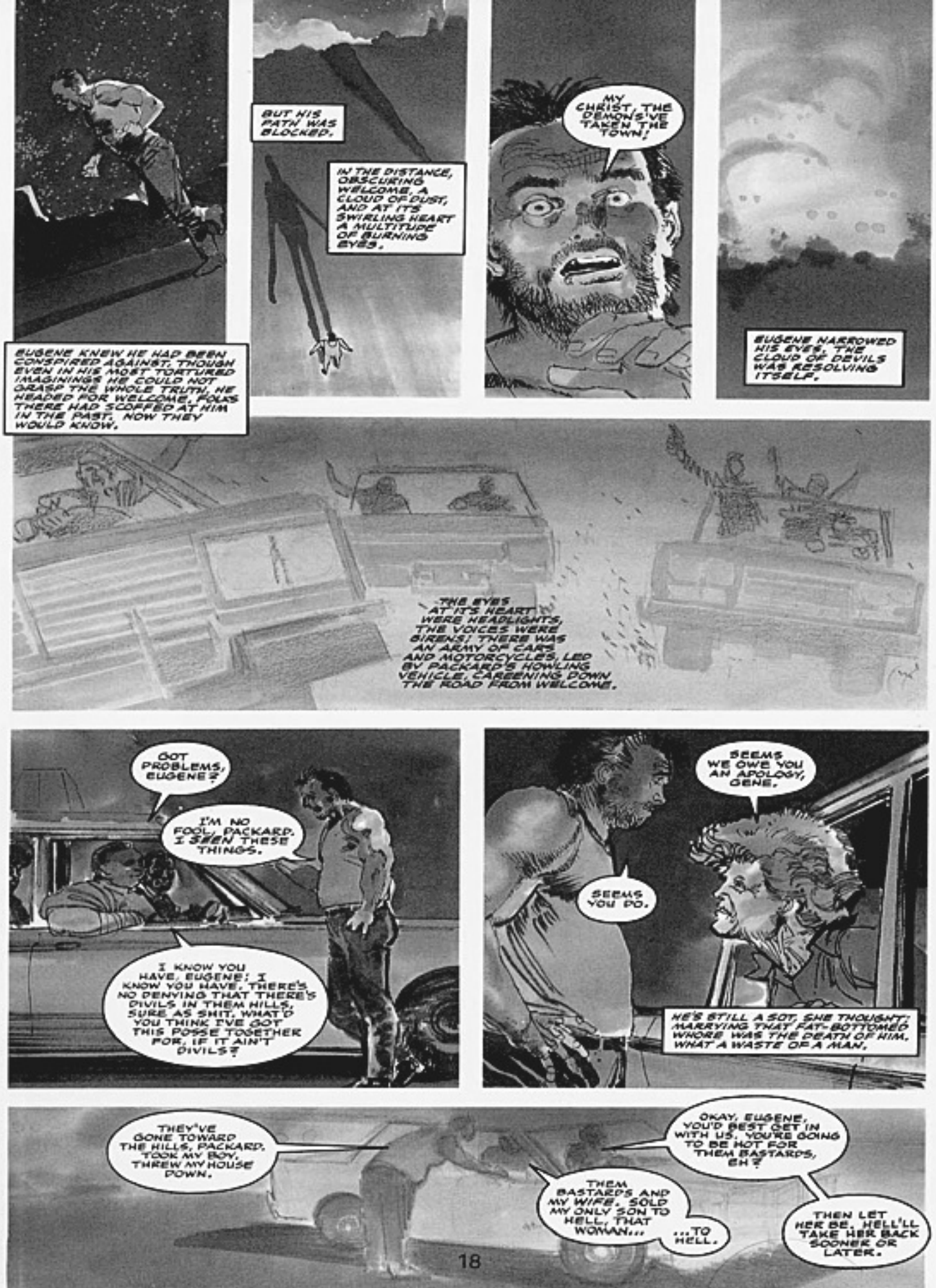
OUTSIDE THE HOUSE, LUCY HAD HEARD THE EXCHANGE OF VOICES. SHE CAME OUT OF THE PROTECTION OF HER SHACK, KNOWING WHAT SHE'D SEE AGAINST THAT SHEENING SKY, BUT NO LESS DIZZIED BY THE MONUMENTAL CREATURES THAT HAD GATHERED ON EVERY SIDE OF THE HOUSE.
PAPA!
AN ANGUISH WENT THROUGH HER, REMEMBERING THE LOST JOYS OF THAT DAY SIX YEARS PREVIOUS. THEY WERE ALL THERE, THE UNFORGETTABLE CREATURES, AN INCREDIBLE SELECTION OF FORMS. AT THE DOOR STOOD THE CREATURE LUCY REMEMBERED WITH GREATEST AFFECTION, THE ONE WHO HAD FIRST TOUCHED HER, FIRST SOOTHED HER FEARS, FIRST ENTERED HER, INFINITELY GENTLY.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW, BOY?
I SAID, WHAT DO YOU KNOW?!
PAPA?
PAPA!
JUBILATION WAS IN AARON'S VOICE. THE WAITING WAS OVER.

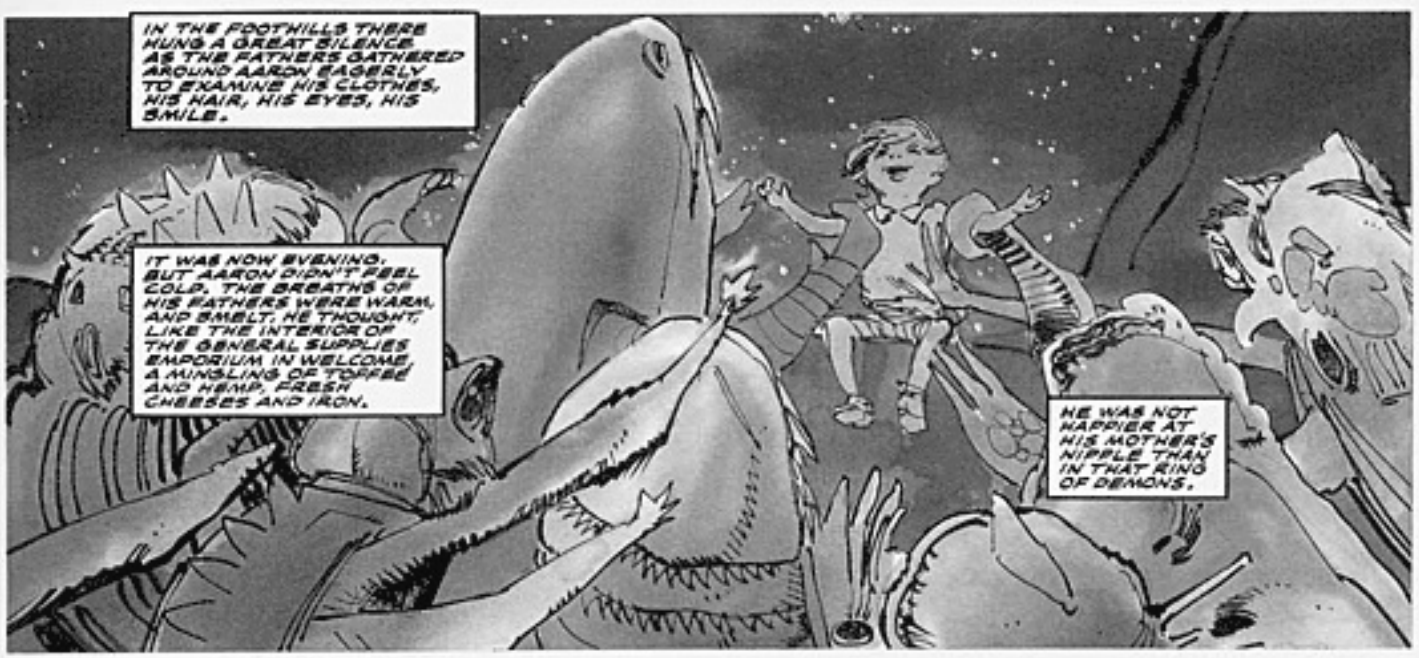
SLAMASH!


EUGENE PEERED UP THROUGH THE VEIL OF DUST: THE ROOF WAS BEING PEELED BACK BY GIANT HANDS, TOWERING ON EVERY SIDE. HE SAW THE LIMBS, BODIES, AND FACES OF IMPOSSIBLE BEASTS, DESTROYING HIS HOUSE AS CASUALLY AS HE WOULD BREAK A BOTTLE.
PAPA!
A LONG, INDESCRIBABLE NOISE OF JOY WAS UTTERED OUT OF THE DEMON'S LENGTH AND BREADTH. THE HYMN WAS TAKEN UP BY THE OTHER CREATURES, MOUNTING IN CELEBRATION.
EUGENE'S NOSE HAD BEGUN TO BLEED AT THE FIRST NOTES OF THE MONSTER'S MUSIC, AND HIS EYES WERE FULL OF STINGING TEARS.
HE WASN'T FRIGHTENED. HE KNEW THEY WERE NOT CAPABLE OF DOING HIM HARM. HE CRIED BECAUSE HE HAD IGNORED THIS EVENTUALITY FOR SIX YEARS, AND NOW, WITH THEIR MYSTERY AND THEIR GLORY IN FRONT OF HIM, HE SOBBED NOT TO HAVE HAD THE COURAGE TO FACE THEM AND TO KNOW THEM.
NOW IT WAS TOO LATE.

LEAVING EUGENE TO HIS RUINS, LUCY FOLLOWED THE CREATURES. SHE COULD SEE THEIR DWINDLING FORMS, HEAR THEIR VANISHING SONG AS THEY BORE OFF THEIR-- AND HER-- SON.
SHE RAN AFTER THEM, HER GAIT AS SPRIGHTLY AS A YOUNG GIRL'S IN PURSUIT OF HER LOVER.


EUGENE KNEW HE HAD BEEN CONSPIRED AGAINST. THOUGH EVEN IN HIS MOST TORTURED IMAGININGS HE COULD NOT GRASP THE WHOLE TRUTH, HE HEADED FOR WELCOME. FOLKS THERE HAD SCOFFED AT HIM IN THE PAST. NOW THEY WOULD KNOW.
BUT HIS PATH WAS BLOCKED.
IN THE DISTANCE, OBSCURING WELCOME, A CLOUD OF DUST, AND AT ITS SWIRLING HEART A MULTITUDE OF BURNING EYES.
MY CHRIST, THE DEMONS'VE TAKEN THE TOWN!
EUGENE NARROWED HIS EYES. THE CLOUD OF DEVILS WAS RESOLVING ITSELF.
THE EYES AT IT'S HEART WERE HEADLIGHTS, THE VOICES WERE SIRENS! THERE WAS AN ARMY OF CARS AND MOTORCYCLES, LED BY PACKARD'S HOWLING VEHICLE, CAREENING DOWN THE ROAD FROM WELCOME.
GOT PROBLEMS, EUGENE?
I'M NO FOOL, PACKARD. I SEEN THESE THINGS.
I KNOW YOU HAVE, EUGENE; I KNOW YOU HAVE. THERE'S NO DENYING THAT THERE'S DIVILS IN THEM HILLS, SURE AS SHIT. WHAT'D YOU THINK I'VE GOT THIS POSSE TOGETHER FOR, IF IT AIN'T DIVILS?
SEEMS WE OWE YOU AN APOLOGY, GENE.
SEEMS YOU DO.
HE'S STILL A SOT, SHE THOUGHT; MARRYING THAT FAT-BOTTOMED WHORE WAS THE DEATH OF HIM. WHAT A WASTE OF A MAN.
THEY'VE GONE TOWARD THE HILLS, PACKARD. TOOK MY BOY, THREW MY HOUSE DOWN.
OKAY, EUGENE, YOU'D BEST GET IN WITH US. YOU'RE GOING TO BE HOT FOR THEM BASTARDS, EH?
THEM BASTARDS AND MY WIFE. SOLD MY ONLY SON TO HELL, THAT WOMAN...
...TO HELL.
THEN LET HER BE. HELL'LL TAKE HER BACK SOONER OR LATER.

FROM THE MOMENT SHE'D SEEN THE CAR LIGHTS, SEEN THE GUNS AND THE HELMETS, SHE KNEW SHE HAD LITTLE PLACE IN THE EVENTS AHEAD. THERE WAS NO WAY OF REGAINING AARON; SHE REALIZED THAT. HE BELONGED, IN SOME STRANGE WAY, TO THE CREATURES THAT HAD MARRIED THEIR SEEDS IN HER BODY TO MAKE HIM.
MAYBE SHE'D BEEN A VESSEL FOR SOME EXPERIMENT IN FERTILITY, AND NOW THE DOCTORS HAD RETURNED TO EXAMINE THE RESULTING CHILD. MAYBE THEY HAD SIMPLY TAKEN HIM OUT OF LOVE. WHATEVER THE REASONS, SHE ONLY HOPED SHE WOULD SEE THE OUTCOME OF THE BATTLE.
DEEP IN HER, IN A PLACE TOUCHED ONLY BY MONSTERS, SHE HOPED FOR THEIR VICTORY, EVEN THOUGH MANY OF THE SPECIES SHE CALLED HER OWN WOULD PERISH AS A RESULT.

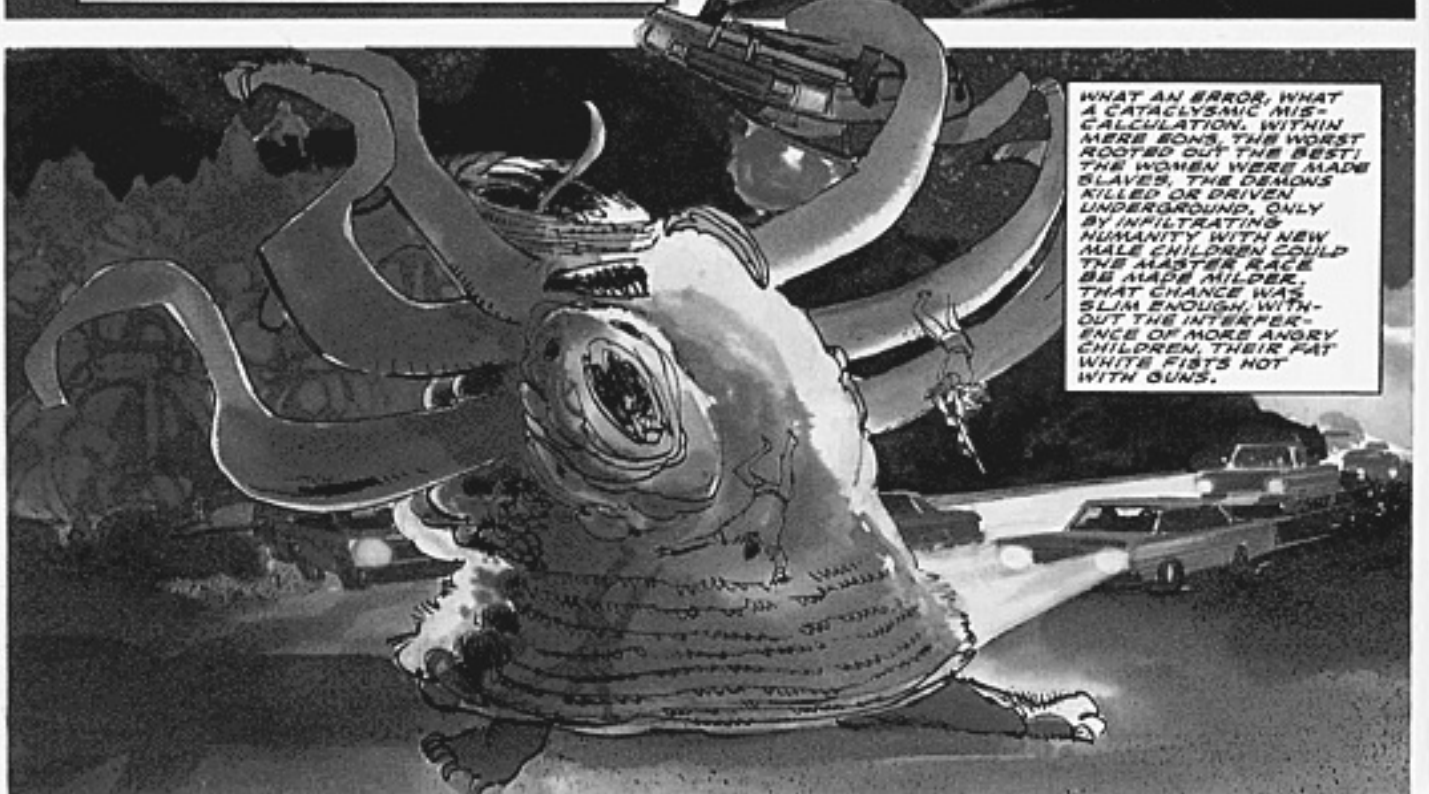

IN THE FOOTHILLS THERE HUNG A GREAT SILENCE AS THE FATHERS GATHERED AROUND AARON EAGERLY TO EXAMINE HIS CLOTHES, HIS HAIR, HIS EYES, HIS SMILE.
IT WAS NOW EVENING. BUT AARON DIDN'T FEEL COLD. THE BREATHS OF HIS FATHERS WERE WARM, AND SMELT, HE THOUGHT, LIKE THE INTERIOR OF THE GENERAL SUPPLIES EMPORIUM IN WELCOME, A MINGLING OF TOFFEE AND HEMP, FRESH CHEESES AND IRON.
HE WAS NOT HAPPIER AT HIS MOTHER'S NIPPLE THAN IN THAT RING OF DEMONS.

MEN -- WE'VE ARRIVED, WE'RE ORGANIZED, AND WE'VE GOT GOD ON OUR SIDE!
IT OCCURRED TO BOTH KOOKER AND DAVIDSON THAT AS SNEAK ATTACKS WENT, THIS WOULD NOT BE AMONGST THE QUIETEST.
THESE DIVILS TOOK EUGENE'S BOY AARON NOT FOUR HOURES PAST. TOOK HIM FAIRLY OFF HIS MOTHER'S TIT WHILE SHE WAS ROCKING HIM TO SLEEP. THEY AIN'T NOTHIN' BUT SAVAGES, SO WHEN YOU GET UP CLOSE TO ONE, YOU JUST THINK HOW YOU'D HAVE FELT IF YOU'D BEEN TAKEN FROM YOUR MOTHER'S TIT...
PACKARD LIKED THE PHRASE "MOTHER'S TIT." IT SAID SO MUCH, SO SIMPLY. MOMMA'S TIT HAD A GOOD DEAL MORE POWER TO MOVE THESE MEN THAN HER APPLE PIE.
HAD HE KNOWN WHO NAPOLEON BONAPARTE WAS, NO DOUBT HE WOULD HAVE FELT LIKE THAT CONQUEROR. HAD HE KNOWN THAT CONQUEROR'S LIFE STORY, HE MIGHT HAVE SENSED THAT THIS WAS HIS WATERLOO! BUT JOSH PACKARD LIVED AND DIED BEREFT OF HEROES.

AARON FELT THE AIR CHANGE. IT WASN'T THAT HE WAS COLD: THE BREATHS THAT WARMED HIM REMAINED AS EMBRACING AS EVER. NO, SOMETHING WAS WRONG. SOMETHING, SOMEONE, WAS COMING TO INTERFERE WITH THIS NIGHT OF FESTIVAL, UNPLANNED AND UNINVITED.
AARON SCENTED PACKARD AND HIS STEPFATHER, AND SMELLING THEM, KNEW THEM TO BE ALIEN. AFTER TONIGHT THEY WOULD BE KNOWN DISPASSIONATELY, LIKE ANIMALS OF A DIFFERENT SPECIES. IT WAS THE GORGEOUS ARRAY OF DEMONS AROUND HIM HE FELT CLOSEST TO, AND HE KNEW HE WOULD PROTECT THEM, IF NECESSARY, WITH HIS LIFE.

THE DEMONS WERE NOT UNPREPARED FOR THIS EVENTUALITY. WAS IT NOT INEVITABLE THAT THE HEROES OF WELCOME WOULD COME AFTER THE BOY? DIDN'T THEY BELIEVE, IN THEIR PITIABLE WAY, THAT THEIR SPECIES WAS BORN OUT OF THE EARTH'S NECESSITY TO KNOW ITSELF, NURTURED FROM MAMMAL TO MAMMAL UNTIL IT BLOSSOMED AS HUMANITY?

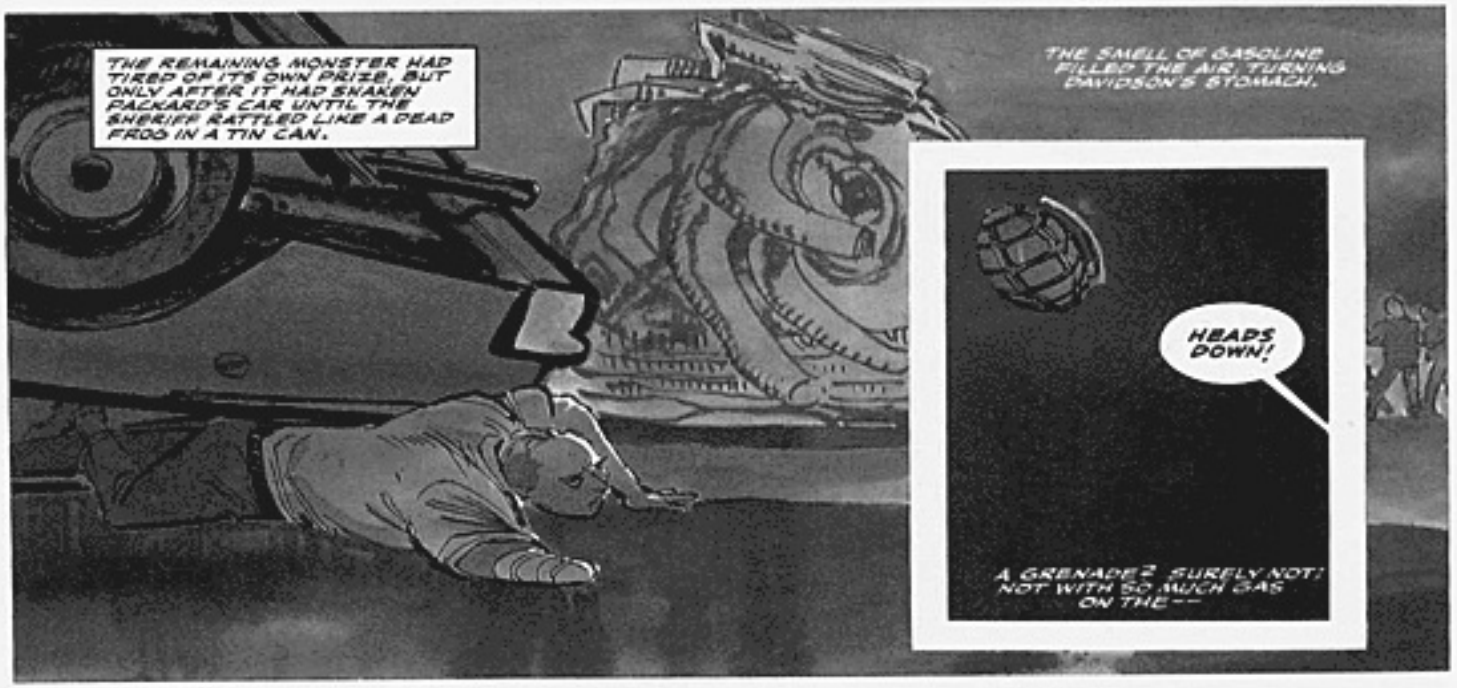
YAAAAH!
WOMEN HAD ALWAYS EXISTED: THEY HAD LIVED, A SPECIES TO THEMSELVES, WITH THE DEMONS. BUT THEY HAD WANTED PLAYMATES, AND TOGETHER THEY HAD MADE MEN, THE MARRIAGE OF SEMEN IN LUCY'S BODY WAS THE SAME MIX THAT MADE THE FIRST MALES.
BLAM!


WHAT AN ERROR, WHAT A CATACLYSMIC MISCALCULATION. WITHIN MERE EONS, THE WORST ROOTED OUT THE BEST: THE WOMEN WERE MADE SLAVES, THE DEMONS KILLED OR DRIVEN UNDERGROUND, ONLY BY INFILTRATING HUMANITY WITH NEW MALE CHILDREN COULD THE MASTER RACE BE MADE MILDER. THAT CHANCE WAS SLIM ENOUGH, WITHOUT THE INTERFERENCE OF MORE ANGRY CHILDREN, THEIR FAT WHITE FISTS HOT WITH GUNS.

THE DEMON SHOOK THE CAR AS A CHILD MIGHT A TOY UNTIL THE DRIVER'S DOOR OPENED AND JEDEDIAH FELL TO THE GROUND AT THE CREATURE'S SKIRT OF SKIN.
BLAM!
BLAM!
MA! HELP MEEEE!
ATTTACK!

DAVIDSON OFFERED UP A SILENT PRAYER TO YAHWEH, BUDDHA, AND GROUCHO MARX. GRANT ME POWER, GRANT ME INDIFFERENCE, GRANT ME A SENSE OF HUMOR.
ACROSS A CLUTTER OF CRASHED VEHICLES AND BLOOD-SPATTERED HOODS, HE SAW THE DEMONS SLOPING AWAY FROM THE BATTLE, LEAVING THIS ONE EXTRAORDINARY MONSTER TO HOLD THE BRIDGEHEAD.

SKRAK!
THERE'D BE NO PITCHED BATTLE, NO HAND-TO-TENTACLE FIGHT. THE BOY WOULD SIMPLY BE EATEN ALIVE, OR WHATEVER THEY PLANNED FOR THE POOR LITTLE BASTARD. INDEED, WASN'T THAT HIS TAIL FROM THE RETREATING DEMONS WERE HOLDING SO HIGH, LIKE A TROPHY?


THE REMAINING MONSTER HAD TIRED OF ITS OWN PRIZE, BUT ONLY AFTER IT HAD SHAKEN PACKARD'S CAR UNTIL THE SHERIFF RATTLED LIKE A DEAD FROG IN A TIN CAN.
THE SMELL OF GASOLINE FILLED THE AIR, TURNING DAVIDSON'S STOMACH.
HEADS DOWN!
A GRENADE? SURELY NOT! NOT WITH SO MUCH GAS ON THE--

THERE WAS A SMELL IN THE AIR LIKE BURNT CANDY! THE CREATURE WAS CLEARLY IN AN AGONY OF CREMATION. A FLAKE OF FIRE DROPPED FROM THE TOWERING DEMON AND TOUCHED THE LAKE OF GASOLINE IN WHICH PACKARD HAD LANDED.
KABLAM!
DEMON OR MAN-- NEITHER STOOD A CHANCE OF SURVIVAL. THE FLAMES WASHED THEM AWAY.

AFTER HOURS OF WALKING IN THE DESERT, LUCY TOO ARRIVED AT THE SCENE. SHE COULD HEAR AND SEE THE REMAINS OF THE BATTLE, BUT SHE DID NOT GO THAT WAY. ON THE HORIZON, SHE SAW WHAT SHE WAS AFTER: A LINE OF CREATURES, HURRYING AWAY FROM THE HILLS. AND, ONCE AGAIN, SHE BEGAN TO RUN.
BUT, IN AN EMPTY STRETCH OF DESERT, THE CONVOCATION OF DEMONS SIMPLY DISAPPEARED FROM SIGHT. FROM WHERE LUCY WAS STANDING, PANTING IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, THEY SEEMED TO HAVE BEEN SWALLOWED UP BY THE EARTH.
SURELY SHE COULD AT LEAST SEE HER SON AND HIS FATHERS ONCE MORE, BEFORE THEY LEFT FOREVER? OR WAS SHE, AFTER ALL HER YEARS OF ANTICIPATION, TO BE DENIED EVEN THAT?
IN THE LEAD CAR, DAVIDSON WAS DRIVING, COMMANDEERED TO DO SO BY EUGENE, WHO WAS NOT AT PRESENT A MAN TO BE ARGUED WITH. HIS ORDERS TO THE STRAGGLING ARMY THAT FOLLOWED HIM WERE TWO PARTS INCOHERENT OBSCENITIES TO ONE PART SENSE.
SEE, THEM BLACK-EYED SONS OF BITCHES DON'T HAVE NO FUCKING HEADS!
I--I DON'T KNOW WHICH WAY THEY'VE GONE!
SHOW ME WHERE THE REST OF 'EM ARE OR I'LL BLOW YOUR BRAINS OUT!
WHAT YOU MEAN? SHOW ME!
I CAN'T SHOW YOU IF THEY'VE DISAPPEARED.
STOP THE CARS! STOP!
A SUDDEN SILENCE. THERE WAS NOTHING TO BE SEEN OR HEARD IN ANY DIRECTION. THEY'D DISAPPEARED, THE WHOLE CACOPHONOUS TRIBE OF DEMONS HAD SIMPLY VANISHED INTO THE AIR, CHIMERICAL.
LUCY WALKED TOWARD THE LINE OF CARS. IT WAS ALL OVER BY NOW. THEY HAD ALL BEEN TRICKED! THE DISAPPEARING ACT WAS A TRUMP CARD NO ONE COULD HAVE ANTICIPATED.
THEN SHE HEARD AARON.
SHE COULDN'T SEE HIM, BUT HIS VOICE WAS AS CLEAR AS A BELL; AND LIKE A BELL, IT SUMMONED. LIKE A BELL, IT RANG OUT: CELEBRATE WITH US.
EUGENE HEARD IT TOO. THEY WERE NEAR AFTER ALL.
WHERE IS HE? WHERE?

HEY! HERE!
THERE HE IS!
LUCY AND THE CONVOY HEADED TOWARD HIM.

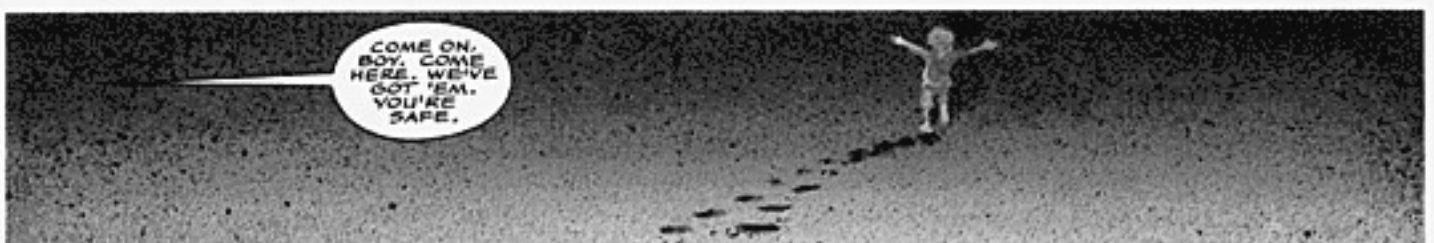
HE'S GOING IN.
THEN FOLLOW THE LITTLE BASTARD! MAYBE HE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT HE'S DOING.

NO--

--DON'T.

DAVIDSON WAS SUDDENLY SCARED. HE BEGAN TO SLOW THE CAR.
GET ON WITH IT, BOY. HE'S LEADING US RIGHT TO 'EM! WE'VE GOT THEM CORNERED!

LET'S GET 'EM, MEN!


COME ON, BOY. COME HERE. WE'VE GOT 'EM. YOU'RE SAFE.

COME TO PAPA, BOY.

THE FACADE OF BOYHOOD BROKE AS THE FATHER INSIDE THE SON SHOWED ITS VAST AND UNIMAGINABLE FACE.

GOD.
EVEN AS AARON BECAME HIS FATHER'S SON, THE SLOPE BEGAN TO SOFTEN.
DAVIDSON FELT IT FIRST: A SLIGHT SHIFT IN THE TEXTURE OF THE SAND, AS THOUGH AN ORDER HAD PASSED THROUGH IT, SUBTLE BUT ALL-PERVASIVE.

EUGENE COULD ONLY GAPE AS AARON'S TRANSFORMATION CONTINUED, HIS ENTIRE BODY NOW OVERTAKEN BY THE TREMORS OF CHANGE, MARVELOUS IN ITS COMPLEXITY, AS OUT OF THE CRADLE OF THE BOY'S SUBSTANCE CAME NEW GLORIES.

BLAM!

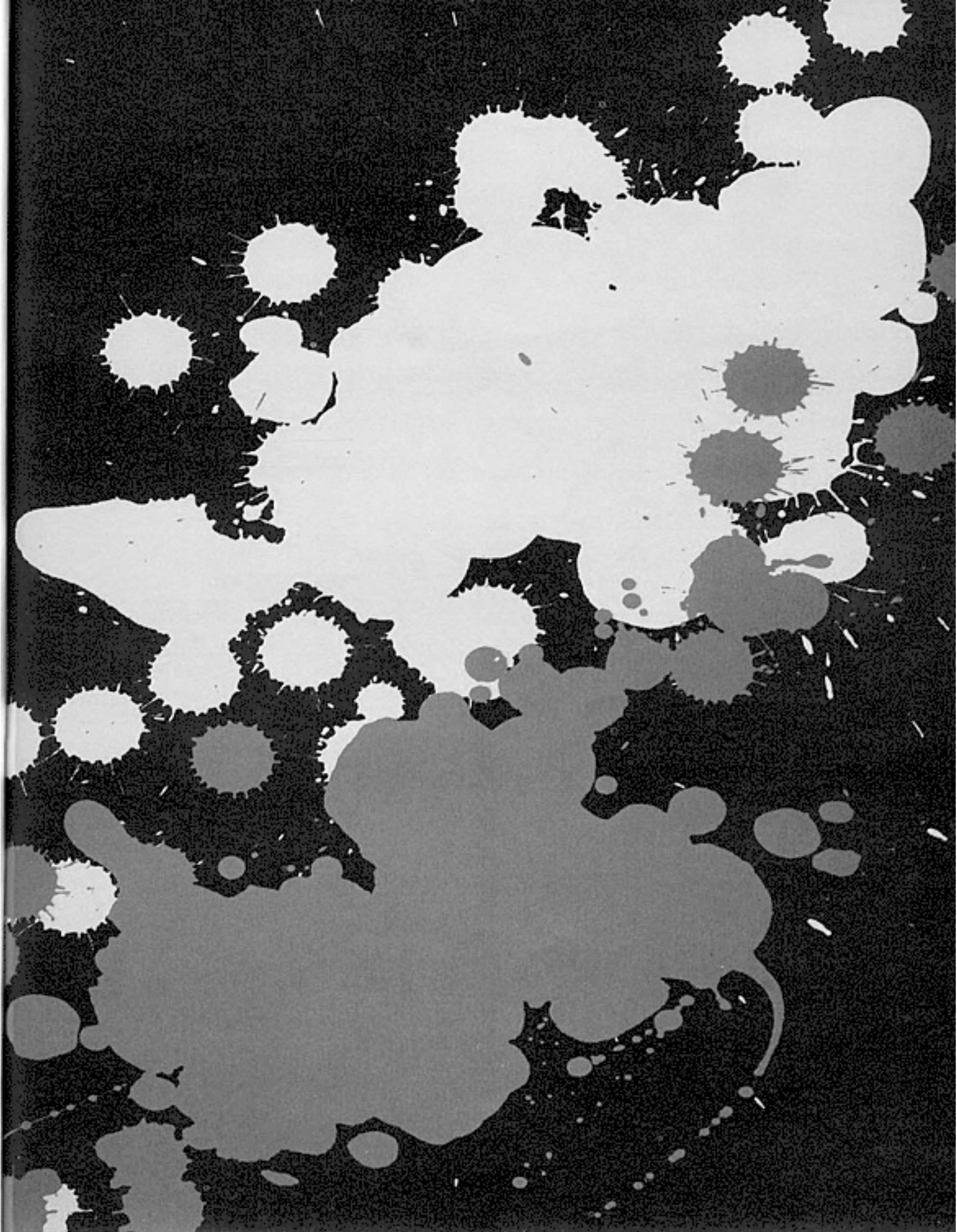
THE GEOMETRIES IN THE DARKNESS MOVED OUT OF HIDING TO HELP THE CHILD. THE INTRICACY OF THEIR FORMS WAS SIMPLIFIED IN THE GLARE OF THE HEADLAMPS BUT THEY SEEMED, EVEN AS THEY APPEARED, TO BE CHANGING AGAIN: BODIES BECOMING THIN IN THEIR GRIEF, A WHINE OF MOURNING LIKE A SOLID WALL OF SOUND FROM THEIR HEARTS.
AARROOOOO

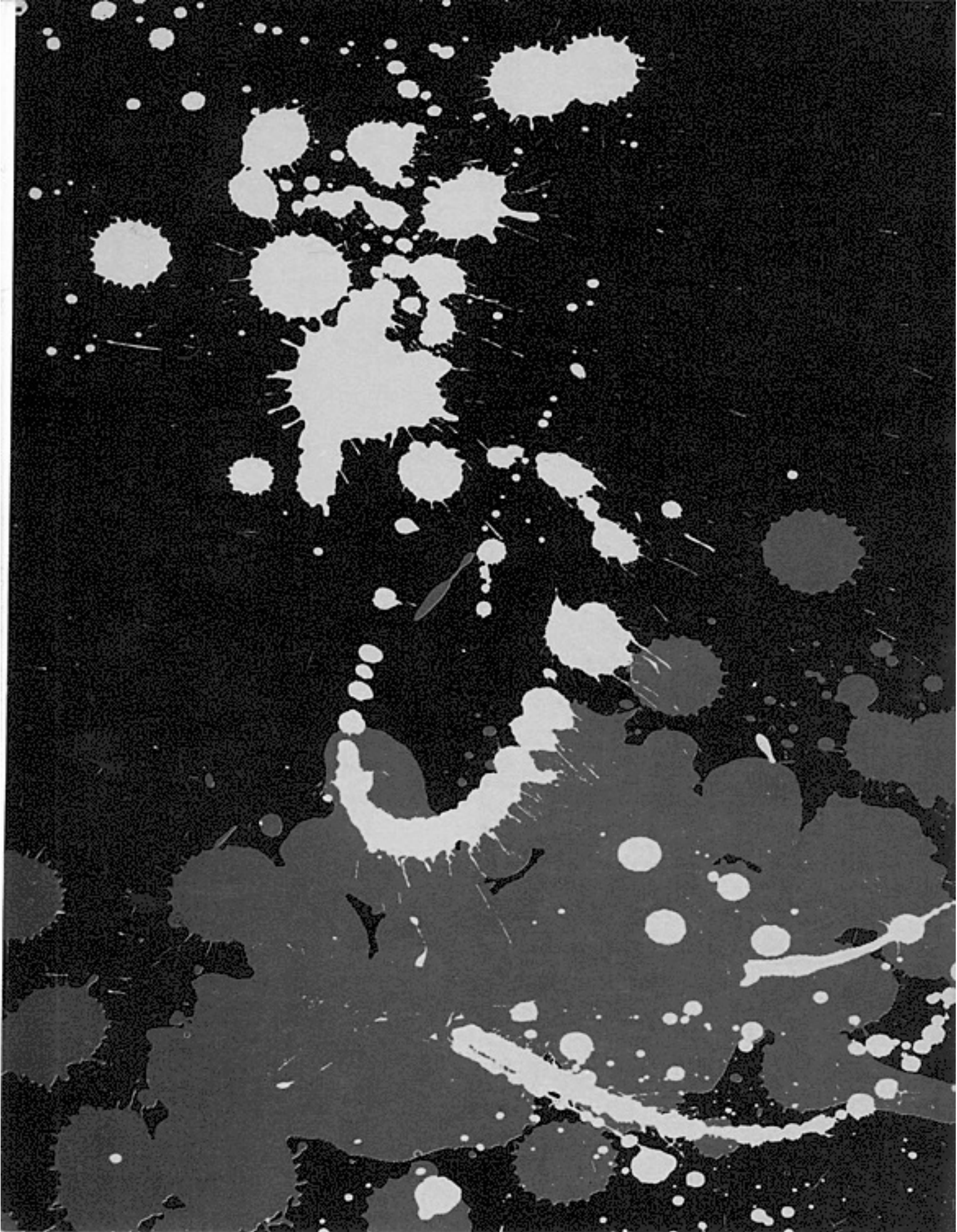
WE GOT 'EM NOW! DIRTY, STINKING FACELESS FUCKERS...
BLAM!
BUT THE MUD BENEATH HIS FEET WAS LIKE WARM TREACLE AS IT ROSE AROUND HIS SHINS.
HE WAS KICKING LIKE A HOG WITH ITS THROAT CUT, AND WITH EVERY KICK HIS BODY SUNK DEEPER. AS HIS FACE DISAPPEARED BENEATH THE MUD, HE JUST GLIMPSED LUCY, STANDING AT THE EDGE OF THE SLOPE, STARING DOWN TOWARD AARON'S BODY.
BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!
gnyahh!

THE DEMONS HAD GONE: RETREATED INTO THE DARK, THEIR LAMENT SUNK AWAY.
THE DESERT WAS UPON THEM WITH LIGHTNING SPEED.

LIKE CONCRETE, THE SAND HARDENED, FIXING ITS LIVING TROPHIES LIKE FLIES IN AMBER.
JESUS GOD!

GET HELP! GET HELP!
THE HEAD WAS SILENT; BY HIS GLAZED LOOK, IT WAS APPARENT THAT HE'D LOST HIS MIND.
THE MOUTH COULD ONLY SCREAM.
JESUS!
AND DAVIDSON? HE SCARCELY THOUGHT OF HIMSELF, OF THE EAST, OF BARBARA, OF THE CHILDREN, HE THOUGHT NOT AT ALL.
PLEASE HELP US... FETCH HELP.
YES...
IT WOULD BE NOON BEFORE SHE COULD FETCH HELP TO THE WOMAN, TO THE TORSO, TO THE HEAD, TO THE MOUTH. BY THAT TIME THE WILDERNESS WOULD HAVE HAD THE BEST OF THEM. THE SUN WOULD HAVE BOILED THEIR BRAIN-PANS DRY, SNAKES WOULD HAVE NESTED IN THEIR HAIR, THE BUZZARDS WOULD HAVE HOOKED OUT THEIR HELPLESS EYES.
SHE GLANCED ROUND ONCE MORE AT THEIR TRIVIAL FORMS, DWARFED BY THE BLOODY SWEEP OF THE DAWN SKY. LITTLE DOTS AND COMMAS OF HUMAN PAIN ON A BLANK SHEET OF SAND.
LUCY DIDN'T CARE TO THINK OF THE PEN THAT WROTE THEM THERE. THAT WAS FOR TOMORROW.
AFTER A WHILE, SHE BEGAN TO RUN.





IN THE HILLS, THE CITIES

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN BOLTON

IT WASN'T UNTIL THE FIRST WEEK OF THE YUGOSLAVIAN TRIP THAT MICK DISCOVERED WHAT A POLITICAL BIGOT HE'D CHOSEN AS A LOVER.

CERTAINLY HE'D BEEN WARNED. ONE OF THE QUEENS AT THE BATHS HAD TOLD HIM JUDD WAS TO THE RIGHT OF ATTILA THE HUN. BUT THE MAN HAD BEEN ONE OF JUDD'S EX-AFFAIRS, AND MICK HAD PRESUMED THERE WAS MORE SPITE THAN PERCEPTION IN THE CHARACTER ASSASSINATION.

IF ONLY HE'D LISTENED. THEN HE WOULDN'T BE RIDING ALONG AN INTERMINABLE ROAD IN A VOLKSWAGEN THAT SUDDENLY SEEMED THE SIZE OF A COFFIN, LISTENING TO JUDD'S VIEWS ON SOVIET EXPANSIONISM. JESUS, HE WAS SO BORING.

IT WASN'T THAT HE DISAGREED WITH EVERYTHING JUDD SAID. SOME OF THE ARGUMENTS (THE ONES MICK UNDERSTOOD) SEEMED QUITE SENSIBLE. BUT THEN, WHAT DID HE KNOW? HE WAS A DANCE TEACHER. JUDD WAS A JOURNALIST, A PROFESSIONAL PUNDIT.

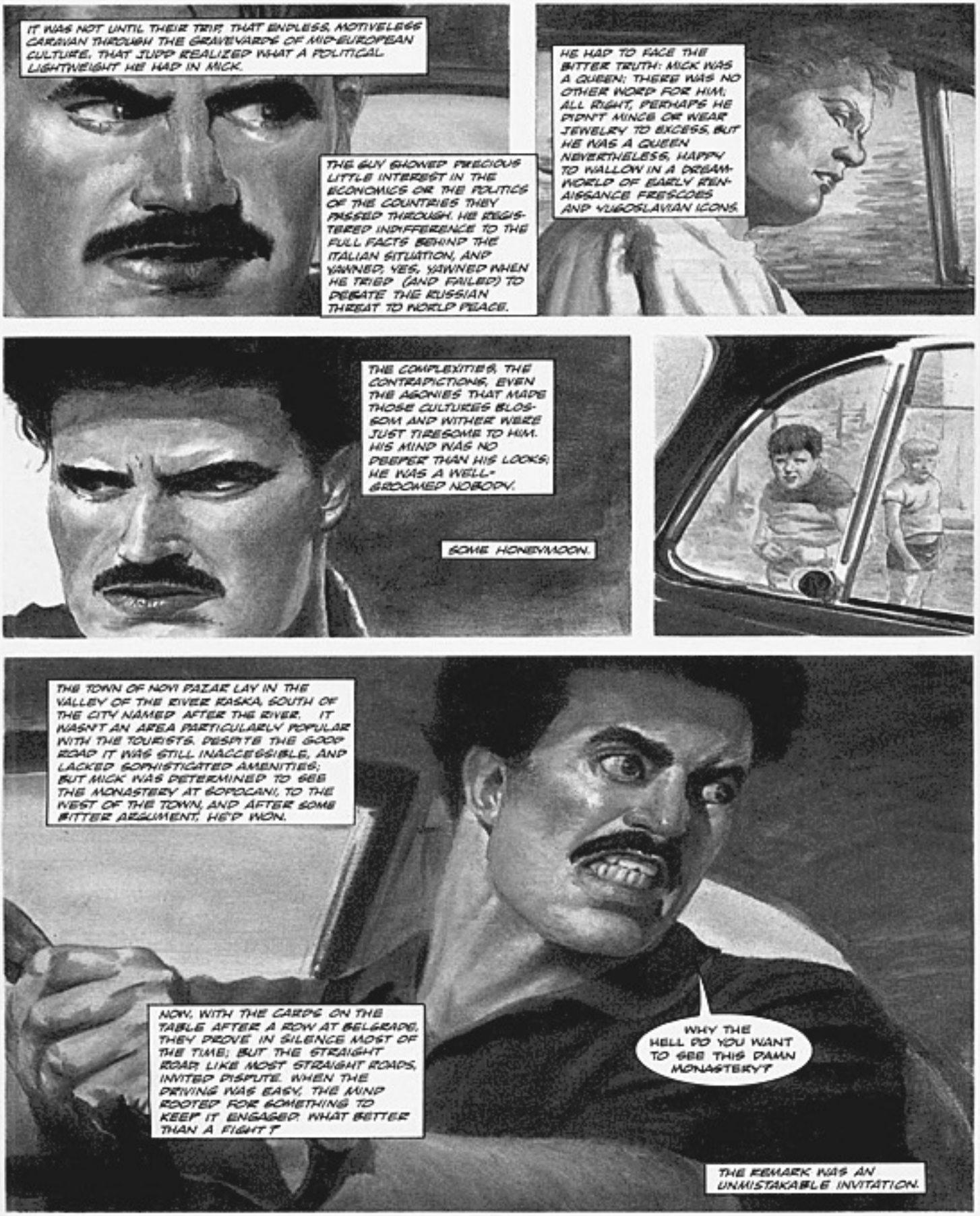
HE FELT, LIKE MOST JOURNALISTS MICK HAD ENCOUNTERED, THAT HE WAS OBLIGED TO HAVE AN OPINION ON EVERYTHING UNDER THE SUN, ESPECIALLY POLITICS; THAT WAS THE BEST TROUGH TO WALLOW IN. YOU COULD GET YOUR SNOUT, EYES, HEAD AND FRONT HOOVES IN THAT MESS OF MUCK AND HAVE A FINE OLD TIME SPLASHING AROUND.

EVERYTHING, ACCORDING TO JUDD, WAS POLITICAL. THE ARTS WERE POLITICAL. SEX WAS POLITICAL. RELIGION, COMMERCE, GARDENING, EATING, DRINKING AND FARTING--ALL POLITICAL.

JESUS, IT WAS MIND-BLOWINGLY BORING; KILLINGLY, LOVE-DEADENINGLY BORING.

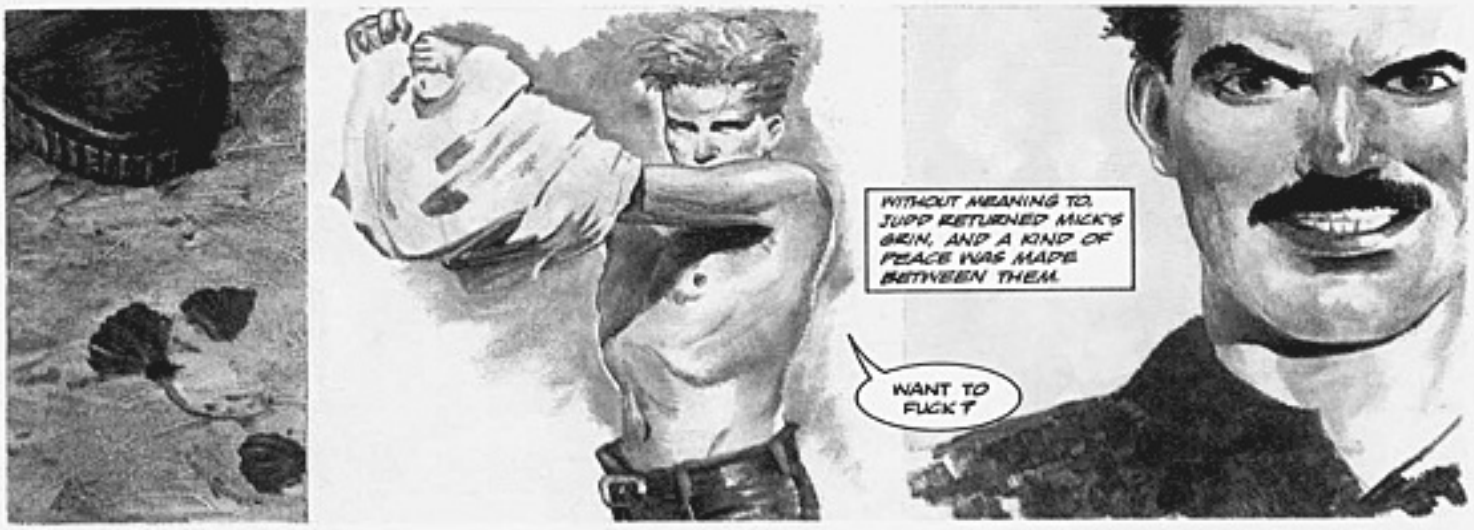
WORSE STILL, JUDD DIDN'T SEEM TO NOTICE HOW BORED MICK HAD BECOME, OR IF HE NOTICED, HE DIDN'T CARE.

JUDD, MICK HAD DECIDED, WAS A SELFISH BASTARD, AND AS SOON AS THEIR HONEYMOON WAS OVER HE'D PART WITH THE GUY.


IT WAS NOT UNTIL THEIR TRIP THAT ENDLESS, MOTIVELESS CARAVAN THROUGH THE GRAVEYARDS OF MID-EUROPEAN CULTURE, THAT JUPP REALIZED WHAT A POLITICAL LIGHTWEIGHT HE HAD IN MICK.
THE GUY SHOWED PRECIOUS LITTLE INTEREST IN THE ECONOMICS OR THE POLITICS OF THE COUNTRIES THEY PASSED THROUGH. HE REGISTERED INDIFFERENCE TO THE FULL FACTS BEHIND THE ITALIAN SITUATION, AND YAWNED; YES, YAWNED WHEN HE TRIED (AND FAILED) TO DEBATE THE RUSSIAN THREAT TO WORLD PEACE.
HE HAD TO FACE THE BITTER TRUTH: MICK WAS A QUEEN; THERE WAS NO OTHER WORD FOR HIM. ALL RIGHT, PERHAPS HE DIDN'T MINCE OR WEAR JEWELRY TO EXCESS, BUT HE WAS A QUEEN NEVERTHELESS, HAPPY TO WALLOW IN A DREAM-WORLD OF EARLY RENAISSANCE FRESCOES AND YUGOSLAVIAN ICONS.
THE COMPLEXITIES, THE CONTRADICTIONS, EVEN THE AGONIES THAT MADE THOSE CULTURES BLOSSOM AND WITHER WERE JUST TIRESOME TO HIM. HIS MIND WAS NO DEEPER THAN HIS LOOKS; HE WAS A WELL-GROOMED NOBODY.
SOME HONEYMOON.
THE TOWN OF NOVI PAZAR LAY IN THE VALLEY OF THE RIVER RASKA, SOUTH OF THE CITY NAMED AFTER THE RIVER. IT WASN'T AN AREA PARTICULARLY POPULAR WITH THE TOURISTS. DESPITE THE GOOD ROAD IT WAS STILL INACCESSIBLE, AND LACKED SOPHISTICATED AMENITIES; BUT MICK WAS DETERMINED TO SEE THE MONASTERY AT SOPOCANI, TO THE WEST OF THE TOWN, AND AFTER SOME BITTER ARGUMENT, HE'D WON.
NOW, WITH THE CARDS ON THE TABLE AFTER A ROW AT BELGRADE, THEY DROVE IN SILENCE MOST OF THE TIME; BUT THE STRAIGHT ROAD, LIKE MOST STRAIGHT ROADS, INVITED DISPUTE. WHEN THE DRIVING WAS EASY, THE MIND ROOTED FOR SOMETHING TO KEEP IT ENGAGED. WHAT BETTER THAN A FIGHT?
WHY THE HELL DO YOU WANT TO SEE THIS DAMN MONASTERY?
THE REMARK WAS AN UNMISTAKABLE INVITATION.

WE'VE COME ALL THIS WAY...
MORE FUCKING VIRGINS, IS IT?
LISTEN: "THERE SOME OF THE GREATEST WORKS OF SERBIAN PAINTING MAY BE SEEN, INCLUDING WHAT MANY COMMENTATORS AGREE IS THE MASTERPIECE OF THE RASKA SCHOOL-- 'THE DORMITION OF THE VIRGIN.'"
I'M UP TO HERE WITH CHURCHES!
IT'S A MASTERPIECE.
THEY'RE ALL MASTERPIECES ACCORDING TO THAT BLOODY BOOK!
TWO AND A HALF HOURS AT MOST--
I TOLD YOU, I DON'T WANT TO SEE ANOTHER CHURCH; THE SMELL OF THE PLACES MAKES ME SICK. STALE INCENSE, OLD SWEAT AND LIES...
IT'S A SHORT DETOUR; THEN WE CAN GET BACK ON TO THE ROAD AND YOU CAN GIVE ME ANOTHER LECTURE ON FARMING SUBSIDIES IN THE SANDZAK.
I'M JUST TRYING TO GET SOME DECENT CONVERSATION GOING INSTEAD OF THIS ENDLESS TRIPE ABOUT SERBIAN FUCKING MASTERPIECES--
STOP THE CAR!
WHAT?
STOP THE CAR!
MICK TOOK A DEEP BREATH, AND WANDERED INTO THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD EMPTY OF TRAFFIC AND OF PEDESTRIANS IN BOTH DIRECTIONS, IN EVERY DIRECTION, EMPTY.
WHAT DID YOU STOP US FOR?
JUDD'S VOICE WAS EDGY, STILL HOPING FOR THAT ARGUMENT, BEGGING FOR IT.
I ASKED YOU A QUESTION.

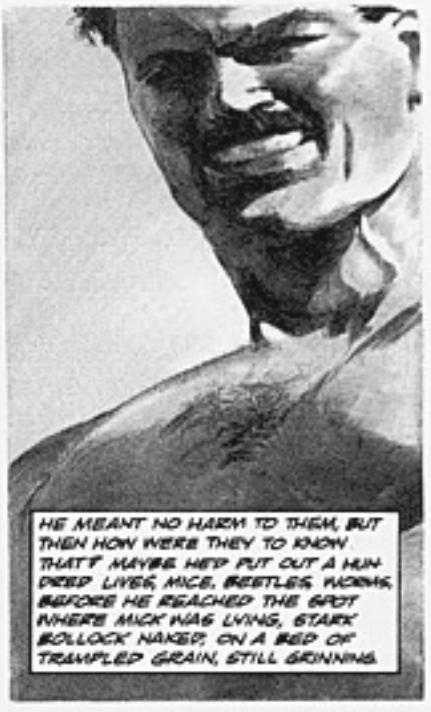
MICK LOOKED AROUND. JUDD WAS STANDING ON THE FAR SIDE OF THE CAR, HIS BROWS A KNITTED LINE OF BURGEONING ANGER. BUT HANDSOME. OH YES. A FACE THAT MADE WOMEN WEEP WITH FRUSTRATION THAT HE WAS GAY. A HEAVY BLACK MOUSTACHE (PERFECTLY TRIMMED) AND EYES YOU COULD WATCH FOREVER, AND NEVER SEE THE SAME LIGHT IN THEM TWICE. WHY IN GOD'S NAME, THOUGHT MICK, DOES A MAN AS FINE AS THAT HAVE TO BE SUCH AN INSENSITIVE LITTLE SHITT
JUDD RETURNED THE LOOK OF CONTEMPTUOUS APPRAISAL, STARING AT THE POUTING PRETTY BOY ACROSS THE ROAD. IT MADE HIM WANT TO PUKE, SEEING THE LITTLE ACT MICK WAS PERFORMING FOR HIS BENEFIT. IT MIGHT JUST HAVE BEEN PLAUSIBLE IN A SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD VIRGIN. IN A TWENTY-FIVE-YEAR-OLD, IT LACKED CREDIBILITY.

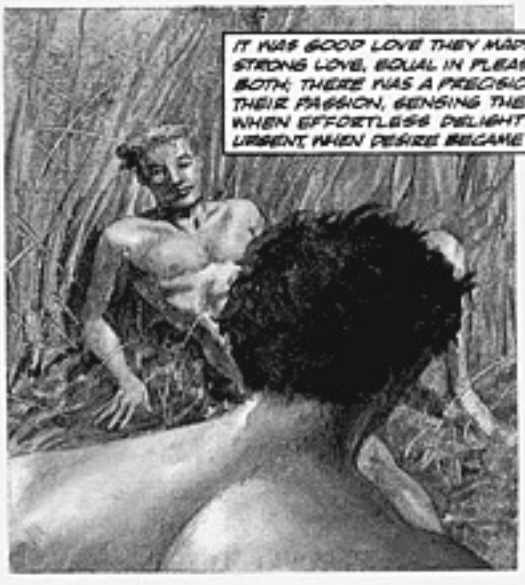

WITHOUT MEANING TO, JUDD RETURNED MICK'S GRIN, AND A KIND OF PEACE WAS MADE BETWEEN THEM.
WANT TO FUCK?

IT'S NO USE. WE'RE NOT COMPATIBLE.
WANTA BATT
MICK WAS ALREADY UNZIPPED AND TURNING AWAY TOWARD THE WHEAT FIELD THAT BORDERED THE ROAD.
JUDD WATCHED AS MICK CUT A SWATHE THROUGH THE SWAYING SEA, HIS BACK THE COLOR OF THE GRAIN, SO THAT HE WAS ALMOST CAMOUFLAGED BY IT. IT WAS A DANGEROUS GAME, SCREWING IN THE OPEN AIR--THIS WASN'T SAN FRANCISCO OR EVEN HAMPSTEAD HEATH.
NERVOUSLY, JUDD GLANCED ALONG THE ROAD. STILL EMPTY IN BOTH DIRECTIONS.

AND MICK WAS TURNING, DEEP IN THE FIELD, TURNING AND SMILING AND WAVING LIKE A SWIMMER BUOYED UP IN A GOLDEN SURF.
WHAT THE HELL...THERE WAS NOBODY TO SEE, NOBODY TO KNOW. JUST THE HILLS, LIQUID IN THE HEAT-HAZE, THEIR FORESTED BACKS BENT TO THE BUSINESS OF THE EARTH, AND A LOST DOG, SITTING AT THE EDGE OF THE ROAD, WAITING FOR SOME LOST MASTER.

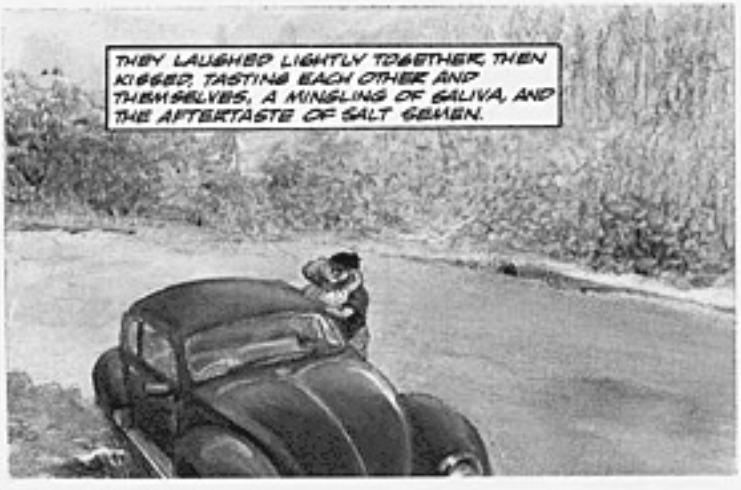
FIELD MICE RAN AHEAD OF HIM, SCURRYING THROUGH THE STALKS AS THE GIANT CAME THEIR WAY. HIS FEET LIKE THUNDER, JUDD SAW THEIR PANIC, AND SMILED.


HE MEANT NO HARM TO THEM, BUT THEN HOW WERE THEY TO KNOW THAT? MAYBE, HE'D PUT OUT A HUNDRED LIVES, MICE, BEETLES, WORMS, BEFORE HE REACHED THE SPOT WHERE MICK WAS LYING, STARK BOLLOCK NAKED, ON A BED OF TRAMPLED GRAIN, STILL GRINNING.


IT WAS GOOD LOVE THEY MADE, GOOD, STRONG LOVE, EQUAL IN PLEASURE FOR BOTH; THERE WAS A PRECISION TO THEIR PASSION, SENSING THE MOMENT WHEN EFFORTLESS DELIGHT BECAME URGENT, WHEN DESIRE BECAME NECESSITY.

THEY LOCKED TOGETHER, LIMB AROUND LIMB, TONGUE AROUND TONGUE, IN A KNOT ONLY ORGASM COULD UNTIE, THEIR BACKS ALTERNATELY SCORCHED AND SCRATCHED AS THEY ROLLED AROUND EXCHANGING BLOWS AND KISSES.

WHEN THEY FINALLY MADE THEIR WAY BACK TO THE VOLKSWAGEN, THERE WAS BODY-THRESHED WHEAT IN THEIR HAIR AND THEIR EARS, IN THEIR SOCKS AND BETWEEN THEIR TOES. THEIR GRINS HAD BEEN REPLACED WITH EASY SMILES: THE TRUCE, IF NOT PERMANENT, WOULD LAST A FEW HOURS AT LEAST.
WE'LL FORGET THE MONASTERY, EH?
I THOUGHT—
I COULDN'T BEAR ANOTHER FUCKING VIRGIN—


THEY LAUGHED LIGHTLY TOGETHER, THEN KISSED, TASTING EACH OTHER AND THEMSELVES, A MINGLING OF SALIVA, AND THE AFTERTASTE OF SALT SEMEN.

THE FOLLOWING DAY WAS BRIGHT, BUT NOT PARTICULARLY WARM. NO BLUE SKIES: JUST AN EVEN LAYER OF WHITE CLOUD. THE MORNING AIR WAS SHARP IN THE LINING OF THE NOSTRILS, LIKE ETHER, OR PEPPERMINT.
VASLAV JELOVSEK WATCHED THE PIGEONS IN THE MAIN SQUARE OF POPOLAC COURTING DEATH AS THEY SKIPPED AND FLUTTERED AHEAD OF THE VEHICLES THAT WERE BUZZING AROUND.
AN AIR OF SOBER INTENTION BARELY SUPPRESSED THE EXCITEMENT HE FELT ON THIS DAY, AN EXCITEMENT HE KNEW WAS SHARED BY EVERY MAN, WOMAN AND CHILD IN POPOLAC.
SHARED BY THE PIGEONS, TOO, FOR ALL HE KNEW.

THE CLOUD-LAYER WAS LOW: NOT IDEAL FOR THE CELEBRATIONS. A PHRASE PASSED THROUGH HIS MIND, AN ENGLISH PHRASE HED HEARD FROM A FRIEND: "TO HAVE YOUR HEAD IN THE CLOUDS." IT MEANT, HE GATHERED, TO BE LOST IN A REVERIE, IN A WHITE, SIGHTLESS DREAM.
THAT, HE THOUGHT WRYLY, WAS ALL THE WEST KNEW ABOUT CLOUDS, THAT THEY STOOD FOR DREAMS. IT TOOK A VISION THEY LACKED TO MAKE A TRUTH OUT OF THAT CASUAL TURN OF PHRASE.

HERE, IN THESE SECRET HILLS, WOULDN'T THEY CREATE A SPECTACULAR REALITY FROM THOSE IDLE WORDS? A LIVING PROVERB.
A HEAD IN THE CLOUDS.

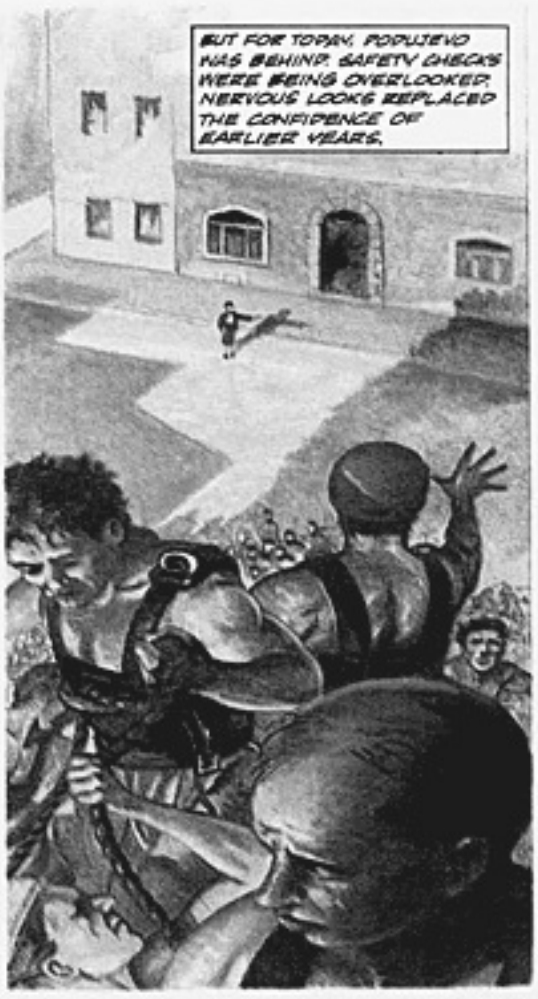
NOW THE FIRST LEG OF POPOLAC WAS ERECTED. HE WATCHED IN ADMIRATION AS THE WORK OF POSITIONING AND BUCKLING AND ROPING WAS COMPLETED. ALL THE SAFETY CHECKS HAD BEEN METICULOUSLY MADE, AND THE LEG LEFT THE SQUARE, ITS SHADOW FALLING HUGELY ACROSS THE FACE OF THE TOWN HALL.

VASLAV SIPPED HIS SWEET, SWEET COFFEE AND ALLOWED HIMSELF A LITTLE GRUNT OF SATISFACTION. SUCH DAYS, SUCH DAYS. DAYS FILLED WITH GLORY, WITH SNAPPING FLAGS AND HIGH, STOMACH-TUENING SIGHTS, ENOUGH TO LAST A MAN A LIFETIME. IT WAS A GOLDEN FORETASTE OF HEAVEN.
LET AMERICA HAVE ITS SIMPLE PLEASURES, ITS CARTOON MICE, ITS CANDY-COATED CASTLES, ITS CULTS AND TECHNOLOGIES; HE WANTED NONE OF IT. THE GREATEST WONDER OF THE WORLD WAS HERE, HIDDEN IN THE HILLS.
AH, SUCH DAYS, THESE LONG AND ARDUOUS DAYS OF MIRACLES, BOTH HERE AND IN--

POPUJEVO. IN THE MAIN SQUARE OF POPOLAC'S RITUAL ENEMY, THE SCENE WAS NO LESS ANIMATED, AND NO LESS INSPIRING. PERHAPS THERE WAS A MUTED SENSE OF SADNESS UNDERLYING THIS YEAR'S CELEBRATION, BUT THAT WAS UNDERSTANDABLE. NITA OBRENOVIC, POPUJEVO'S LOVED AND RESPECTED ORGANIZER, WAS NO LONGER LIVING.

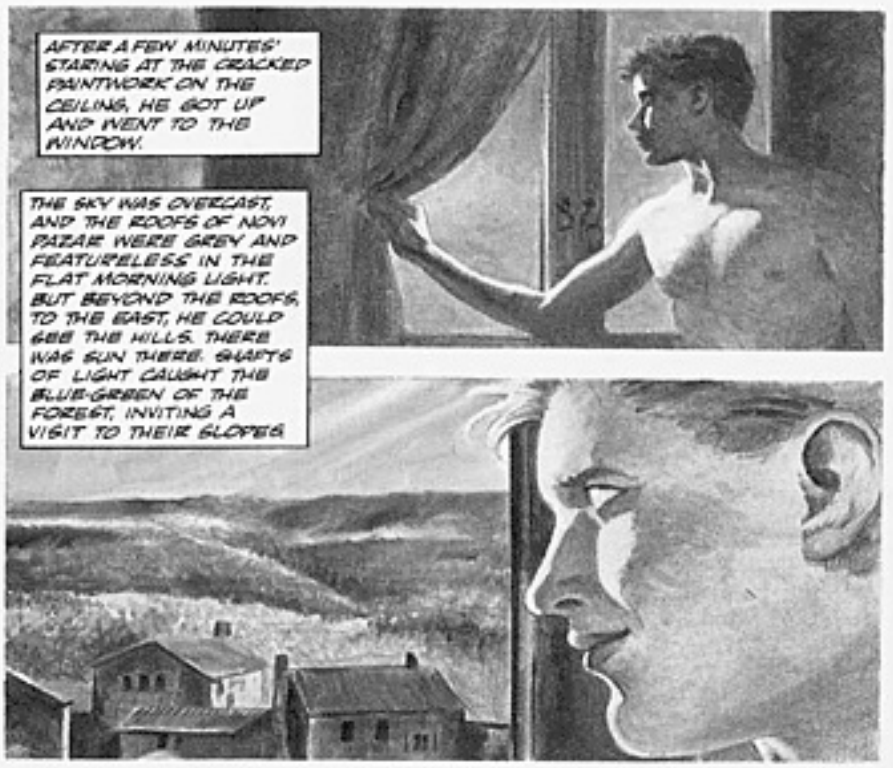
THE PREVIOUS WINTER HAD CLAIMED HER AT THE AGE OF NINETY-FOUR, LEAVING THE CITY BEREFT OF HER FIERCE OPINIONS AND HER FIERCER PROPORTIONS.
FOR SIXTY YEARS NITA HAD WORKED WITH THE CITIZENS OF POPUJEVO, ALWAYS PLANNING FOR THE NEXT CONTEST AND IMPROVING ON THE DESIGNS, HER ENERGIES SPENT ON MAKING THE NEXT CREATION MORE AMBITIOUS AND MORE LIFE-LIKE THAN THE LAST.

NITA'S DAUGHTER HAD TAKEN OVER IN HER MOTHER'S STEAD, BUT SHE LACKED NITA'S POWER TO GALVANIZE THE PEOPLE INTO ACTION. MAYBE, AFTER TWO OR THREE DECADES, AND WITH A FEW MORE CONTESTS UNDER HER BELT, NITA OBRENOVIC'S DAUGHTER WOULD MAKE THE GRADE.


BUT FOR TODAY, POPUJEVO WAS BEHIND. SAFETY CHECKS WERE BEING OVERLOOKED. NERVOUS LOOKS REPLACED THE CONFIDENCE OF EARLIER YEARS.

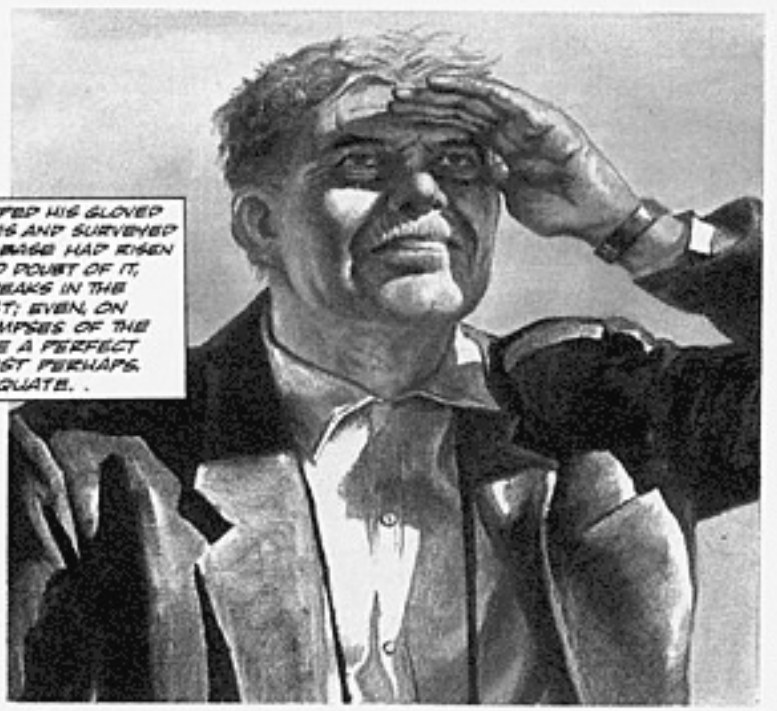
NEVERTHELESS, AT SIX MINUTES BEFORE EIGHT THE FIRST LIMB OF POPUJEVO MADE ITS WAY OUT OF THE CITY TO THE ASSEMBLY POINT, TO WAIT FOR ITS FELLOW.
BY THAT TIME THE FLANKS WERE ALREADY LASHED TOGETHER IN POPOLAC, AND ARMED CONTINGENTS WERE AWAITING ORDERS IN THE TOWN SQUARE.

MICK WOKE PROMPTLY AT SEVEN. A DULL MORNING LIGHT WHIMPERED THROUGH THE THIN HOTEL CURTAINS, NOT ENCOURAGING AN EARLY DEPARTURE.


AFTER A FEW MINUTES' STARING AT THE CRACKED PAINTWORK ON THE CEILING, HE GOT UP AND WENT TO THE WINDOW.
THE SKY WAS OVERCAST, AND THE ROOFS OF NOVI PAZAR WERE GREY AND FEATURELESS IN THE FLAT MORNING LIGHT. BUT BEYOND THE ROOFS, TO THE EAST, HE COULD SEE THE HILLS. THERE WAS SUN THERE. SHAFTS OF LIGHT CAUGHT THE BLUE-GREEN OF THE FOREST, INVITING A VISIT TO THEIR GLADES.

THE HILLS, YES; TODAY HE DECIDED THEY WOULD SEE THE HILLS.
IT WAS EIGHT-FIFTEEN.

BY NINE THE MAIN BODIES OF POPOLAC AND PODUJEVO WERE SUBSTANTIALLY ASSEMBLED IN THEIR ALLOTTED DISTRICTS THE LIMBS OF BOTH CITIES WERE READY AND WAITING TO JOIN THEIR EXPECTANT TORSOS.

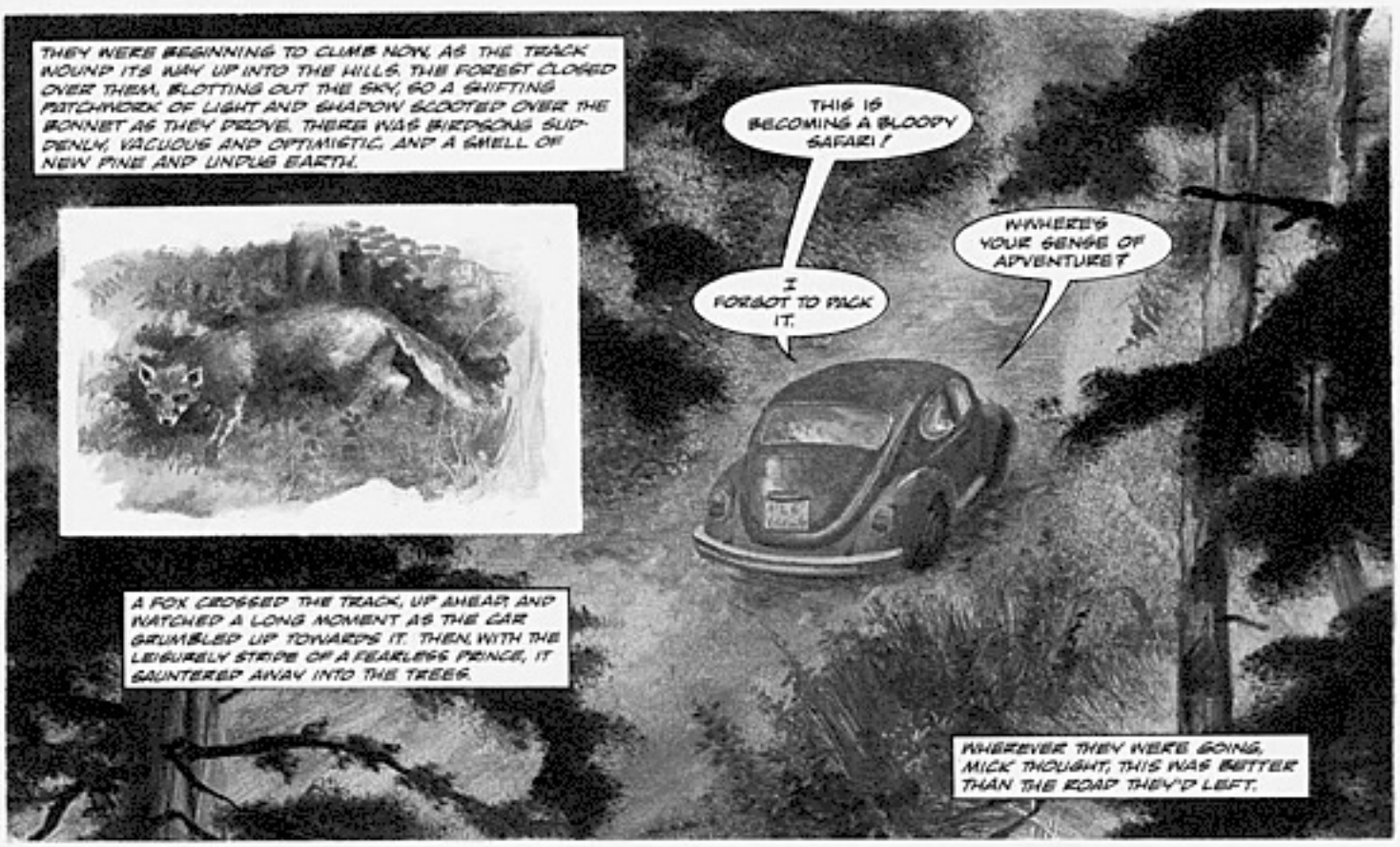

VASLAV JELOVSEK CUPPED HIS GLOVED HANDS OVER HIS EYES AND SURVEYED THE SKY. THE CLOUD-BASE HAD RISEN IN THE LAST HOUR, NO DOUBT OF IT, AND THERE WERE BREAKS IN THE CLOUDS TO THE WEST; EVEN, ON OCCASION, A FEW GLIMPSES OF THE SUN. IT WOULDN'T BE A PERFECT DAY FOR THE CONTEST PERHAPS, BUT CERTAINLY ADEQUATE. .

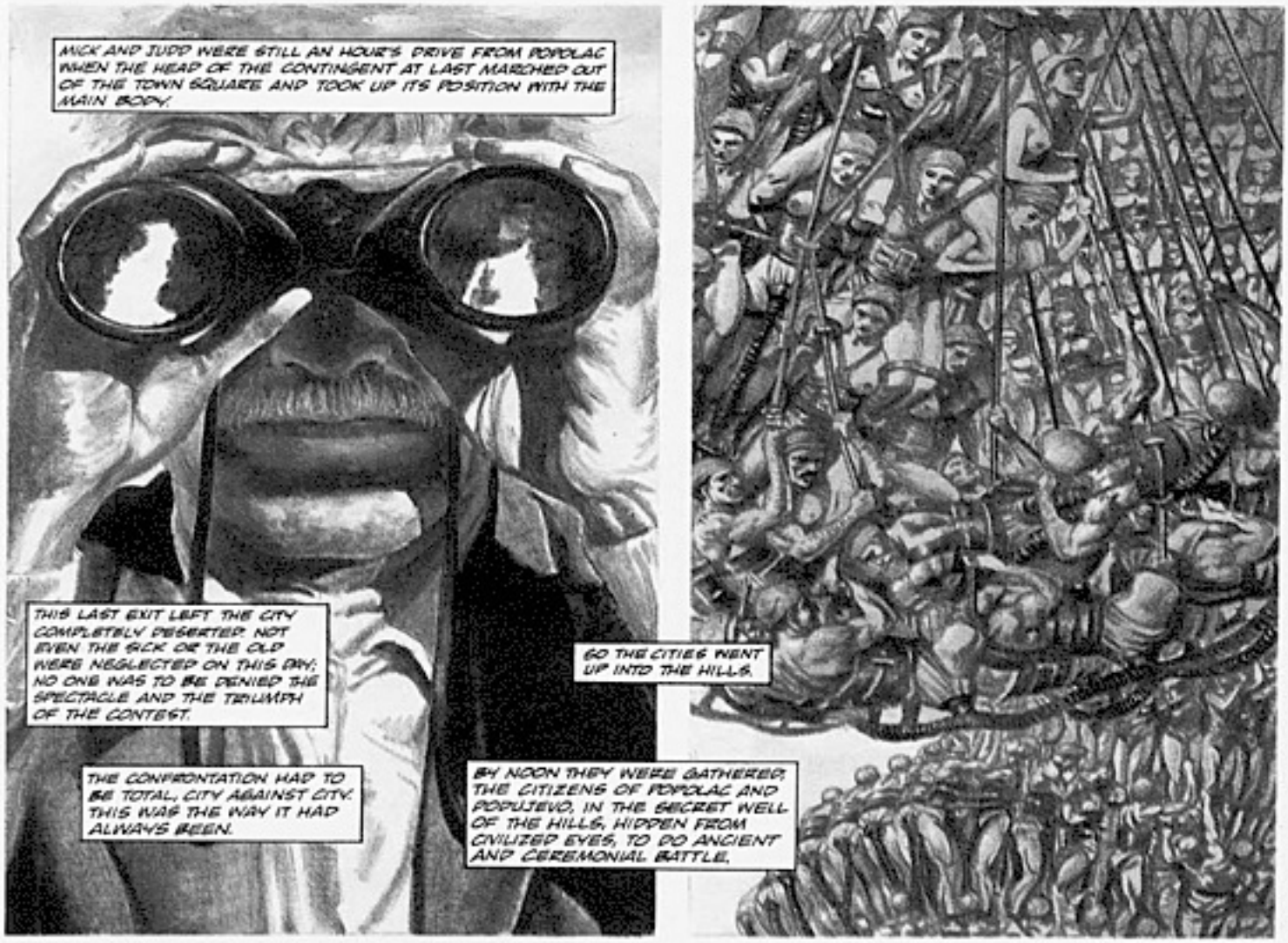
ABOUT NINE-THIRTY MICK AND JUDD MOTORED OUT OF NOVI PAZAR AND TOOK THE GRDOVAC ROAD SOUTH TO THE IBAR VALLEY.
THE ROAD WAS EMPTY. THE FOREST, STILL. THE OCCASIONAL FARMHOUSE THEY DROVE BY APPEARED LOCKED AND SHUTTERED UP.

AT FIRST THIS SOLITARY JOURNEY THROUGH THE HILLS WAS REFRESHING IN ITS LACK OF HUMAN CONTACT, BUT AS THE MORNING DREW ON, AN UNEASINESS BREW ON THEM.
SHOULDN'T WE HAVE SEEN A SIGNPOST TO MITROVICA?
MAYBE...

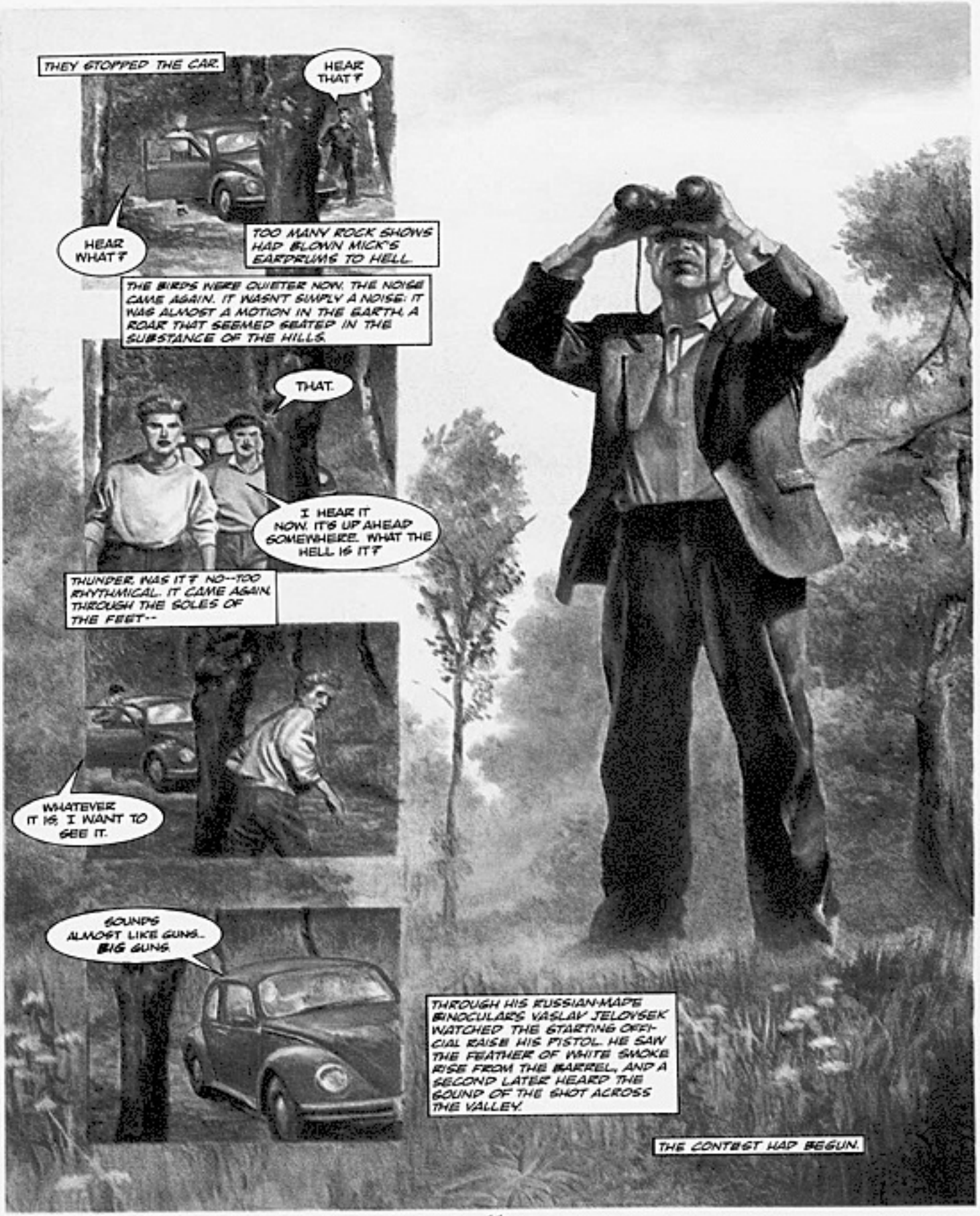
THE ROAD WAS DETERIORATING RAPIDLY.
THUD

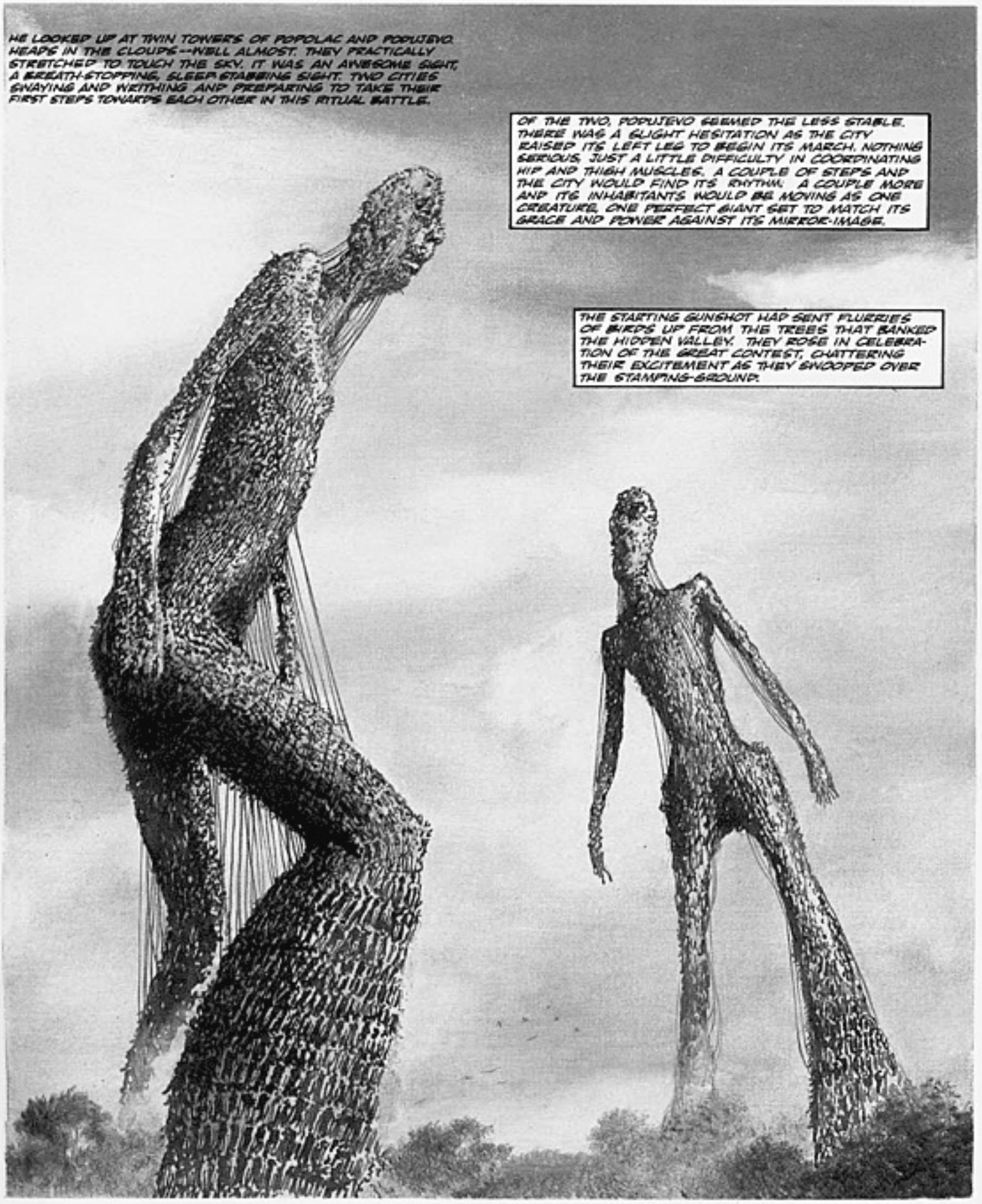
TAKE THE NEXT TURNING. ANYTHING'S BETTER THAN THIS.
THERE!
NOT A MAJOR ROAD, CERTAINLY, BUT IT WAS AN ESCAPE FROM THE ENDLESS PERSPECTIVE OF THE ROAD THEY WERE TRAPPED ON.

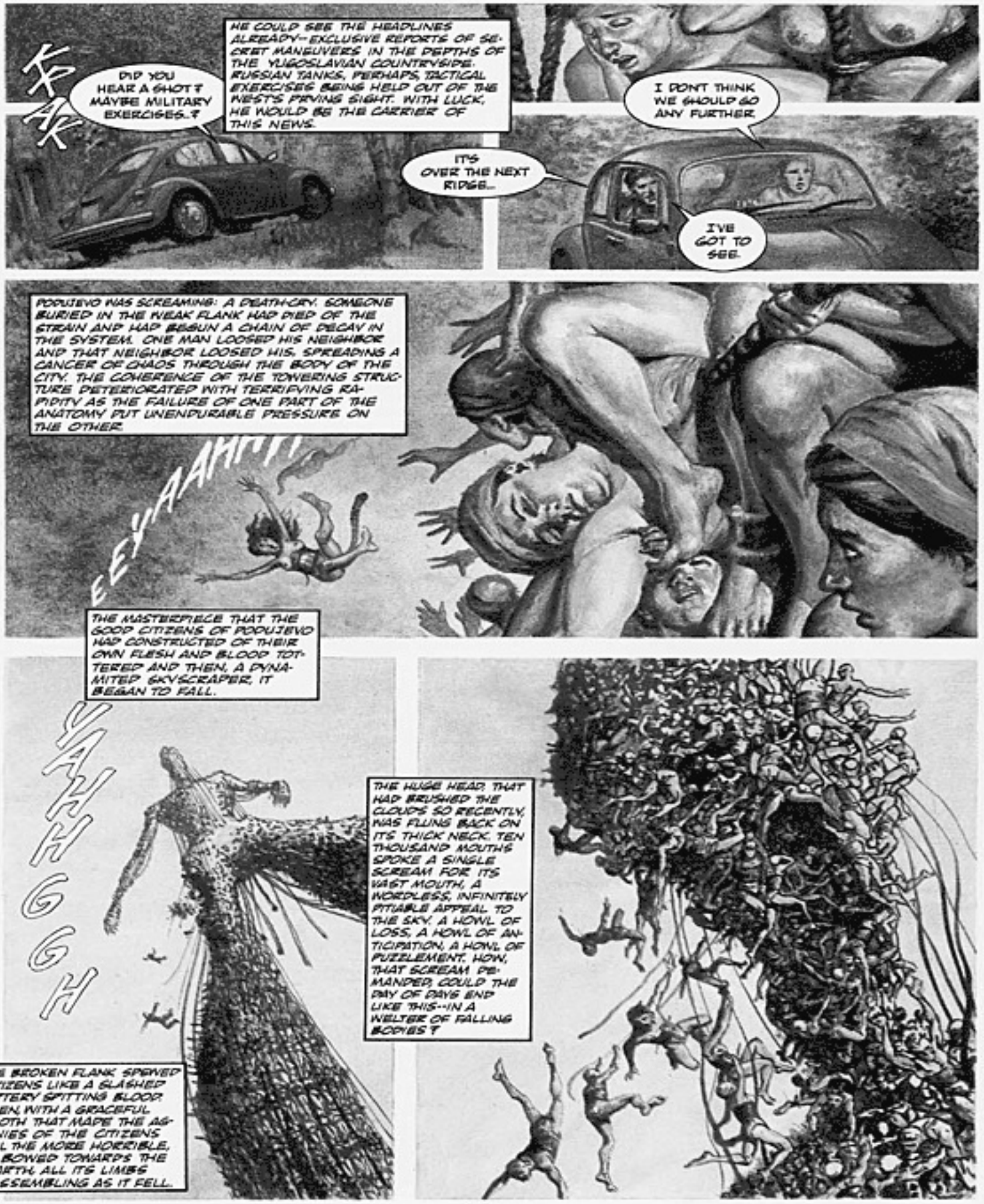

THEY WERE BEGINNING TO CLIMB NOW, AS THE TRACK WOUND ITS WAY UP INTO THE HILLS. THE FOREST CLOSED OVER THEM, BLOTTING OUT THE SKY, SO A SHIFTING PATCHWORK OF LIGHT AND SHADOW SCOOTED OVER THE BONNET AS THEY DROVE. THERE WAS BIRDSONG SUDDENLY, VACUOUS AND OPTIMISTIC, AND A SMELL OF NEW PINE AND UNDUG EARTH.
THIS IS BECOMING A BLOODY SAFARI!
WHERE'S YOUR SENSE OF ADVENTURE?
I FORGOT TO PACK IT.
A FOX CROSSED THE TRACK, UP AHEAD, AND HATCHED A LONG MOMENT AS THE CAR GRUMBLED UP TOWARDS IT. THEN, WITH THE LEISURELY STRIDE OF A FEARLESS PRINCE, IT SAUNTERED AWAY INTO THE TREES.
WHEREVER THEY WERE GOING, MICK THOUGHT, THIS WAS BETTER THAN THE ROAD THEY'D LEFT.


MICK AND JUDD WERE STILL AN HOUR'S DRIVE FROM POPOLAC WHEN THE HEAD OF THE CONTINGENT AT LAST MARCHED OUT OF THE TOWN SQUARE AND TOOK UP ITS POSITION WITH THE MAIN BODY.
THIS LAST EXIT LEFT THE CITY COMPLETELY DESERTED. NOT EVEN THE SICK OR THE OLD WERE NEGLECTED ON THIS DAY; NO ONE WAS TO BE DENIED THE SPECTACLE AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE CONTEST.
THE CONFRONTATION HAD TO BE TOTAL, CITY AGAINST CITY. THIS WAS THE WAY IT HAD ALWAYS BEEN.
BY NOON THEY WERE GATHERED; THE CITIZENS OF POPOLAC AND POPUJEVO, IN THE SECRET WELL OF THE HILLS, HIDDEN FROM CIVILIZED EYES, TO DO ANCIENT AND CEREMONIAL BATTLE.
SO THE CITIES WENT UP INTO THE HILLS.

TENS OF THOUSANDS OF HEARTS BEAT FASTER. TENS OF THOUSANDS OF BODIES STRETCHED AND STRAINED AND SWEATED AS THE TWIN CITIES TOOK THEIR POSITIONS.
IN THE TOWERING BODY OF POPUJEVO, A FEW TECHNICAL HITCHES WERE BECOMING APPARENT. A SLIGHT FLAW IN THE KNITTING OF THE LEFT FLANK HAD RESULTED IN A WEAKNESS THERE; AND THERE WERE CONSEQUENT PROBLEMS IN THE SNIVELLING MECHANISM OF THE HIPS.
THE SHADOWS OF THE BODIES DARKENED TRACTS OF LAND THE SIZE OF SMALL TOWNS; THE WEIGHT OF THEIR FEET TRAMPLED THE GRASS TO A GREEN MILK; THEIR MOVEMENT KILLED ANIMALS, CRUSHED BUSHES, AND THREW DOWN TREES. THE EARTH LITERALLY REVERBERATED WITH THEIR PASSAGE, THE HILLS ECHOING WITH THE BOOMING DIN OF THEIR STEPS.
NOR WERE THE CITIZENS AS RESILIENT AS THEY HAD BEEN IN PREVIOUS CONTESTS. A BAD DECADE FOR CROPS HAD PRODUCED BODIES LESS WELL-NOURISHED; SPINES LESS SUPPLE, WILLS LESS RESOLUTE. THE BADLY KNITTED FLANK MIGHT NOT HAVE CAUSED AN ACCIDENT IN ITSELF, BUT FURTHER WEAKENED BY THE FRAILTY OF THE COMPETITORS, IT SET A SCENE FOR DEATH ON AN UNPRECEDENTED SCALE.


THEY STOPPED THE CAR.
HEAR THAT?
HEAR WHAT?
TOO MANY ROCK SHOWS HAD BLOWN MICK'S EARDRUMS TO HELL.
THE BIRDS WERE QUIETER NOW. THE NOISE CAME AGAIN. IT WASN'T SIMPLY A NOISE: IT WAS ALMOST A MOTION IN THE EARTH, A ROAR THAT SEEMED BEATEN IN THE SUBSTANCE OF THE HILLS.
THAT.
I HEAR IT NOW. IT'S UP AHEAD SOMEWHERE. WHAT THE HELL IS IT?
THUNDER. WAS IT? NO--TOO RHYTHMICAL. IT CAME AGAIN, THROUGH THE SOLES OF THE FEET--
WHATEVER IT IS, I WANT TO SEE IT.
SOUNDS ALMOST LIKE GUNS... BIG GUNS.
THROUGH HIS RUSSIAN-MADE BINOCULARS VASLAV JELOVSEK WATCHED THE STARTING OFFICIAL RAISE HIS PISTOL. HE SAW THE FEATHER OF WHITE SMOKE RISE FROM THE BARREL, AND A SECOND LATER HEARD THE SOUND OF THE SHOT ACROSS THE VALLEY.
THE CONTEST HAD BEGUN.


HE LOOKED UP AT TWIN TOWERS OF POPOLAC AND POPUJEVO HEAPS IN THE CLOUDS--WELL ALMOST. THEY PRACTICALLY STRETCHED TO TOUCH THE SKY. IT WAS AN AWESOME SIGHT, A BREATH-STOPPING, SLEEP STABBING SIGHT. TWO CITIES SWAYING AND WRITHING AND PREPARING TO TAKE THEIR FIRST STEPS TOWARDS EACH OTHER IN THIS RITUAL BATTLE.
OF THE TWO, POPUJEVO SEEMED THE LESS STABLE. THERE WAS A SLIGHT HESITATION AS THE CITY RAISED ITS LEFT LEG TO BEGIN ITS MARCH. NOTHING SERIOUS, JUST A LITTLE DIFFICULTY IN COORDINATING HIP AND THIGH MUSCLES. A COUPLE OF STEPS AND THE CITY WOULD FIND ITS RHYTHM. A COUPLE MORE AND ITS INHABITANTS WOULD BE MOVING AS ONE CREATURE, ONE PERFECT GIANT SET TO MATCH ITS GRACE AND POWER AGAINST ITS MIRROR-IMAGE.
THE STARTING GUNSHOT HAD SENT FLURRIES OF BIRDS UP FROM THE TREES THAT BANKED THE HIDDEN VALLEY. THEY ROSE IN CELEBRATION OF THE GREAT CONTEST, CHATTERING THEIR EXCITEMENT AS THEY SWOOPED OVER THE STAMPING GROUND.


KRAK
DID YOU HEAR A SHOT? MAYBE MILITARY EXERCISES..?
HE COULD SEE THE HEADLINES ALREADY--EXCLUSIVE REPORTS OF SECRET MANEUVERS IN THE DEPTHS OF THE YUGOSLAVIAN COUNTRYSIDE. RUSSIAN TANKS, PERHAPS, TACTICAL EXERCISES BEING HELD OUT OF THE WEST'S PRYING SIGHT. WITH LUCK, HE WOULD BE THE CARRIER OF THIS NEWS.
I DON'T THINK WE SHOULD GO ANY FURTHER.
IT'S OVER THE NEXT RIDGE...
I'VE GOT TO SEE.
PODUJEVO WAS SCREAMING: A DEATH-CRY. SOMEONE BURIED IN THE WEAK FLANK HAD DIED OF THE STRAIN AND HAD BEGUN A CHAIN OF DECAY IN THE SYSTEM. ONE MAN LOOSED HIS NEIGHBOR AND THAT NEIGHBOR LOOSED HIS, SPREADING A CANCER OF CHAOS THROUGH THE BODY OF THE CITY. THE COHERENCE OF THE TOWERING STRUCTURE DETERIORATED WITH TERRIFYING RAPIDITY AS THE FAILURE OF ONE PART OF THE ANATOMY PUT UNENDURABLE PRESSURE ON THE OTHER.
EEYAAHH!!
THE MASTERPIECE THAT THE GOOD CITIZENS OF PODUJEVO HAD CONSTRUCTED OF THEIR OWN FLESH AND BLOOD TOTTERED AND THEN, A DYNAMITED SKYSCRAPER, IT BEGAN TO FALL.
YAHHGGH
THE HUGE HEAD, THAT HAD BRUSHED THE CLOUDS SO RECENTLY, WAS FLUNG BACK ON ITS THICK NECK. TEN THOUSAND MOUTHS SPOKE A SINGLE SCREAM FOR ITS VAST MOUTH, A WORDLESS, INFINITELY PITIABLE APPEAL TO THE SKY. A HOWL OF LOSS. A HOWL OF ANTICIPATION. A HOWL OF FULFILLMENT. HOW, THAT SCREAM DEMANDED, COULD THE DAY OF DAYS END LIKE THIS--IN A WELTER OF FALLING BODIES?
THE BROKEN FLANK SPEWED CITIZENS LIKE A SLASHED ARTERY SPITTING BLOOD. THEN, WITH A GRACEFUL SLOTH THAT MADE THE AGONIES OF THE CITIZENS ALL THE MORE HORRIBLE, IT BOWED TOWARDS THE EARTH, ALL ITS LIMBS DISEMBLING AS IT FELL.

THE PIN OF DYING MOANS, APPEALS, AND IMPRECATIONS FLOODED THE AIR. IT WAS UNMISTAKABLY HUMAN, THOUGH ALMOST DEAFENINGLY LOUD. IT WAS VERY CLOSE.
DID YOU HEAR THAT?!
WE'VE GOT TO GET OUT OF HERE. IF YOU WON'T DRIVE, I WILL.
JUDD SHOOK HIS HEAD. HE WAS PREPARED FOR SOME MILITARY SPECTACLE, BUT THAT NOISE IN HIS EARS WAS THE NOISE OF HUMAN FLESH, TOO HUMAN FOR WORDS. IT REMINDED HIM OF THE ENDLESS, UNSPEAKABLE TORMENTS HIS MOTHER HAD THREATENED HIM WITH IF HE FAILED TO EMBRACE CHRIST.
JESUS CHRIST. JUDD...
IT WAS BLOOD. IN UNENDURABLE ABUNDANCE. BLOOD WITHOUT END.
AND NOW, IN THE BREEZE, THERE WAS THE FLAVOR OF FRESHLY OPENED CARCASSES; THE SMELL OUT OF THE DEPTHS OF THE HUMAN BODY, PART SWEET, PART SAVORY.
AHEAD, THE WORLD HAD BEEN PAINTED RED.
DRIVE, FOR FUCK'S SAKE, DRIVE!
WE MUST LOOK. WE HAVE TO.
WE DON'T HAVE TO DO ANYTHING BUT GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!
NO. PLEASE. NO
RRR RRR RRRRR
THOSE ARE HUMAN VOICES... WE MUST...
...WE MUST...WE MUST...
B717-BLE7

POPOLAC STARED, WITH A THOUSAND EYES, AT THE RUINS OF ITS RITUAL ENEMY, THEN STAGGERED BACK FROM THE SIGHT, ITS ARMS FLAILING THE AIR. BUT IT KEPT ITS BALANCE, EVEN AS A COMMON INSANITY, WOKEN BY THE HORROR AT ITS FEET, SURGED THROUGH ITS SINEWS AND CRIPPLED ITS BRAIN.

THE ORDER WENT OUT: THE BODY THRASHED AND TWISTED AND TURNED FROM THE GRISLY CARPET OF POPULJEVO, AND FLED INTO THE HILLS.

AS IT HEADED INTO OBLIVION, ITS TOWERING FORM PASSED BETWEEN THE CAR AND THE SUN, THROWING ITS COLD SHADOW OVER THE BLOODY ROAD. MICK SAW NOTHING THROUGH HIS TEARS, AND JUDY, HIS EYES NARROWED AGAINST THE SIGHT HE FEARED SEEING AROUND THE NEXT BEND, ONLY DIMLY REGISTERED THAT SOMETHING HAD BLOTTED THE LIGHT FOR A MINUTE.

A CLOUD, PERHAPS. A FLOCK OF BIRDS.

HAD HE LOOKED UP AT THAT MOMENT, JUST STOLEN A GLANCE OUT TOWARDS THE NORTH-EAST, HE WOULD HAVE SEEN POPOLAC'S HEAD, THE VAST SWARMING HEAD OF A MADDENED CITY, DISAPPEARING BELOW HIS LINE OF VISION AS IT MARCHED INTO THE HILLS. HE WOULD HAVE KNOWN THAT THIS TERRITORY WAS BEYOND HIS COMPREHENSION, AND THAT THERE WAS NO HEALING TO BE DONE IN THIS CORNER OF HELL.

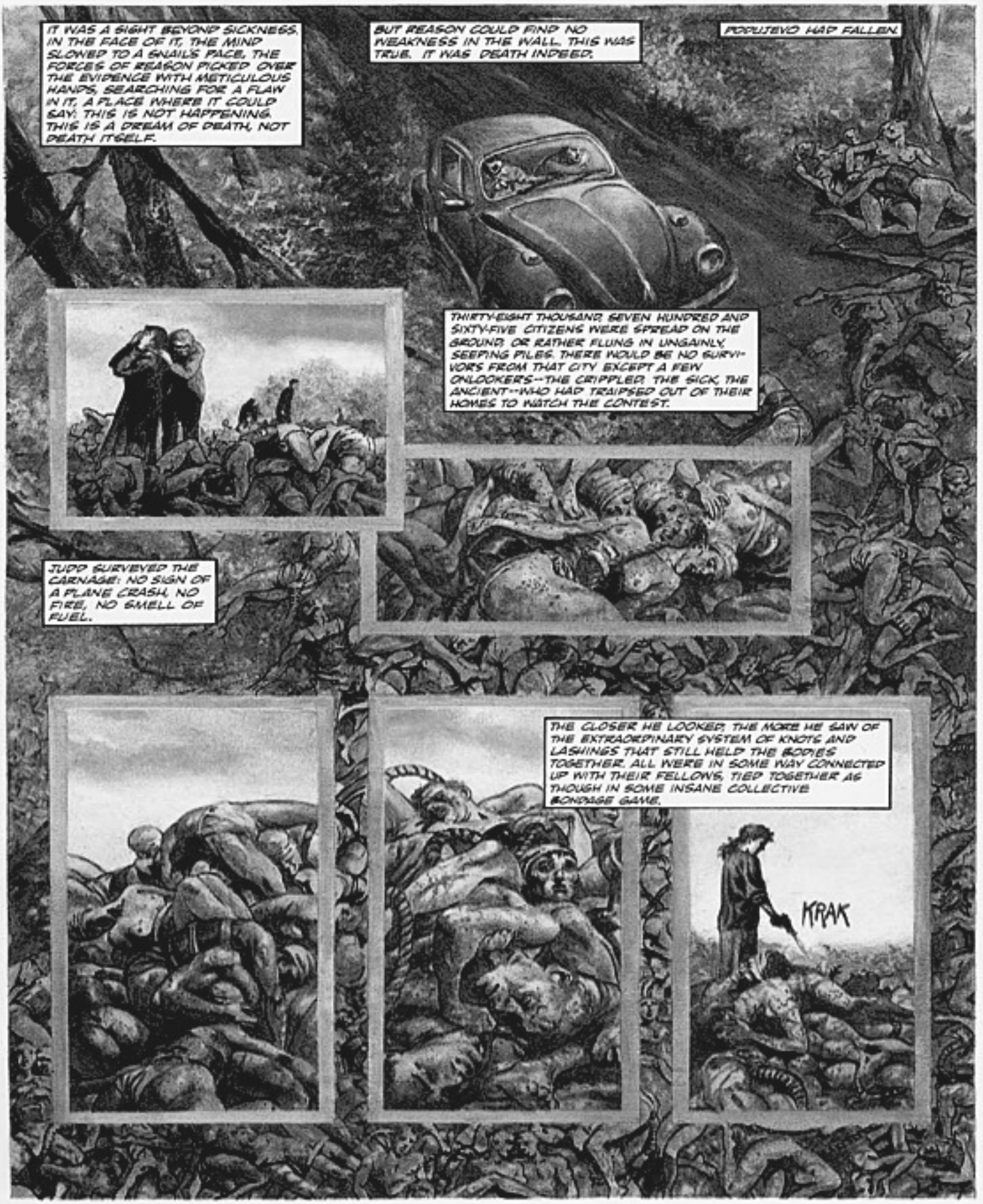
BUT HE DIDN'T SEE THE CITY, AND HE AND MICK'S LAST TURNING POINT HAD PASSED. FROM NOW ON, LIKE POPOLAC AND ITS DEAD TWIN, THEY WERE LOST TO SANITY, AND TO ALL HOPE OF LIFE.

THEY ROUNDED THE BEND, AND THE RUINS OF POPULJEVO CAME INTO SIGHT. THEIR DOMESTICATED IMAGINATIONS HAD NEVER CONCEIVED OF A SIGHT SO UNSPEAKABLY BRUTAL.

PERHAPS IN THE BATTLEFIELDS OF EUROPE AS MANY CORPSES HAD BEEN HEAPED TOGETHER, BUT HAD SO MANY OF THEM BEEN WOMEN AND CHILDREN, LOCKED TOGETHER WITH THE CORPSES OF MEN?

THERE HAD BEEN PILES OF DEAD AS HIGH, BUT EVER SO MANY SO RECENTLY ABUNDANT WITH LIFE?

THERE HAD BEEN CITIES LAID WASTE AS QUICKLY, BUT EVER AN ENTIRE CITY LOST TO THE SIMPLE DICTATE OF GRAVITY?


IT WAS A SIGHT BEYOND SICKNESS. IN THE FACE OF IT, THE MIND SLOWED TO A SNAIL'S PACE, THE FORCES OF REASON PICKED OVER THE EVIDENCE WITH METICULOUS HANDS, SEARCHING FOR A FLAW IN IT, A PLACE WHERE IT COULD SAY: THIS IS NOT HAPPENING. THIS IS A DREAM OF DEATH, NOT DEATH ITSELF.
BUT REASON COULD FIND NO WEAKNESS IN THE WALL. THIS WAS TRUE. IT WAS DEATH INDEED.
POPUJEVO HAD FALLEN.
THIRTY-EIGHT THOUSAND, SEVEN HUNDRED AND SIXTY-FIVE CITIZENS WERE SPREAD ON THE GROUND; OR RATHER FLUNG IN UNGAINLY, SEEPING PILES. THERE WOULD BE NO SURVIVORS FROM THAT CITY EXCEPT A FEW ONLOOKERS--THE CRIPPLED, THE SICK, THE ANCIENT--WHO HAD TRAIPSED OUT OF THEIR HOMES TO WATCH THE CONTEST.
JUDD SURVEYED THE CARNAGE: NO SIGN OF A PLANE CRASH, NO FIRE, NO SMELL OF FUEL.
THE CLOSER HE LOOKED, THE MORE HE SAW OF THE EXTRAORDINARY SYSTEM OF KNOTS AND LASHINGS THAT STILL HELD THE BODIES TOGETHER. ALL WERE IN SOME WAY CONNECTED UP WITH THEIR FELLOWS, TIED TOGETHER AS THOUGH IN SOME INSANE COLLECTIVE BONDAGE GAME.
KRAK

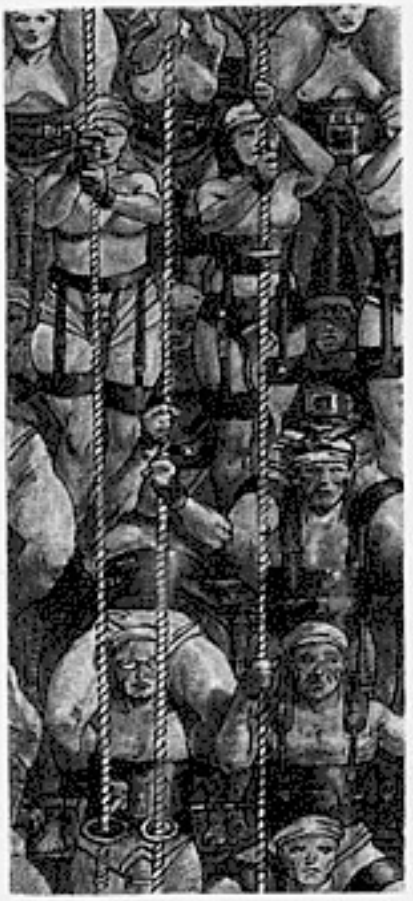
WHAT IS THIS?
KRAK
IT WAS A PITIFULLY INADEQUATE ACT OF MERCY, BUT SHE WENT ON NEVERTHELESS, CHOOSING THE SUFFERING CHILDREN FIRST, EMPTYING THE REVOLVER, FILLING IT AGAIN, EMPTYING IT, FILLING IT, EMPTYING IT--
UH?
IT FELT GOOD TO SHOUT, GOOD TO SOUND ANGRY AT THE WOMAN. MAYBE SHE WAS TO BLAME. IT WOULD BE A FINE THING, JUST TO HAVE SOMEONE TO BLAME.
SHE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND A WORD THIS YOUNG IDIOT WAS SAYING.
WHAT'S HAPPENED HERE? TELL US, FOR GOD'S SAKE. EXPLAIN!
MICK COULD FEEL THE EYES OF THE DEAD ON HIM. EYES LIKE BLACK, SHINING GEMS SET IN BROKEN FACES. EYES LOOKING AT HIM UPSIDE DOWN, ON HEADS SEVERED FROM THEIR SEATING. EYES IN HEAPS THAT HAD SOLID HOWLS FOR VOICES. EYES IN HEAPS BEYOND HOWLS, BEYOND BREATH.
THOUSANDS OF EYES.
HE DIDN'T WANT TO LOOK, BUT THE HAND TOUCHED HIS SHOE AND HE HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO SEE ITS OWNER.
HE WANTED THE WOMAN'S REVOLVER, TO STOP THE HAND FROM TOUCHING HIM. BETTER STILL, HE WANTED A MACHINE GUN, A FLAME-THROWER, ANYTHING TO WIPE THE AGONY AWAY.
JUDD--

KRAK
WE MUST...
WHAT WAS THE IMPERATIVE? IN THIS SITUATION, WHAT MUST THEY DO?
WE MUST...
WE MUST--
HELP--
YEG. WE MUST GET HELP. WE MUST--
GO.
VRRRRRRR
GO! THAT WAS WHAT THEY MUST DO. ON ANY PRETEXT, FOR ANY FRAGILE, COWARDLY REASON, THEY MUST GO. GET OUT OF THE BATTLEFIELD. GET OUT OF THE REACH OF A DYING HAND WITH A WOUND IN PLACE OF A BODY.
BUT THE CAR WAS ALREADY OCCUPIED. VASLAV JELOVSEK DIDN'T WANT TO STEAL THE VEHICLE. BUT HE HAD WORK TO DO. HE HAD BEEN A REFEREE, HE HAD BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CONTEST, AND THE SAFETY OF THE CONTESTANTS.
ONE OF THE HEROIC CITIES HAD ALREADY FALLEN. HE MUST DO EVERYTHING IN HIS POWER TO PREVENT POPOLAC FROM FOLLOWING ITS TWIN. HE MUST CHASE POPOLAC, AND REASON WITH IT. TALK IT DOWN OUT OF ITS TERRORS WITH QUIET WORDS AND PROMISES. IF HE FAILED THERE WOULD BE ANOTHER DISASTER THE EQUAL OF THE ONE IN FRONT OF HIM, AND HIS CONSCIENCE WAS ALREADY BROKEN ENOUGH.
BASTARD!
WE HAVE... WE HAVE...TO CATCH UP!
DON'T ON FOOT! MAPS IN THE CAR, TOO.
JESUS... CHRIST...ALMIGHTY! WE'LL HAVE TO HOP A LIFT.
DON'T YOU SEE, MICK, THEY ALL KNEW THIS WAS HAPPENING. THE PEOPLE IN THE FARMS--THEY GOT THE HELL OUT WHILE THOSE PEOPLE WENT CRAZY UP THERE.
THERE'LL BE NO CARS ALONG THIS ROAD. I'LL LAY YOU ANYTHING-- EXCEPT MAYBE A COUPLE OF SHIT-PUMB TOURISTS LIKE US--AND NO TOURIST WOULD STOP FOR THE LIKES OF US.
WE'LL HAVE TO WALK.
MICK SHRUGGED. EITHER WAY HE COULD SEE THEY HAD A NIGHT ON THE ROAD AHEAD OF THEM. BUT HE WANTED TO WALK SOMEWHERE-- ANYWHERE--AS LONG AS HE PUT DISTANCE BETWEEN HIM AND THE DEAD.

IN POPOLAC A KIND OF PEACE REIGNED. INSTEAD OF A FRENZY OF PANIC THERE WAS A NUMBNESS, A SHEEPLIKE ACCEPTANCE OF THE WORLD AS IT WAS.

LOCKED IN THEIR POSITIONS, STRAPPED, ROPED AND HARNESSED TO EACH OTHER IN A LIVING SYSTEM THAT ALLOWED FOR NO SINGLE VOICE TO BE LOUDER THAN ANY OTHER, NOR ANY BACK TO LABOR LESS THAN ITS NEIGHBOR'S, THEY LET AN INSANE CONSENSUS REPLACE THE TRANQUIL VOICE OF REASON.

THEY WERE CONVULSED INTO ONE MIND, ONE THOUGHT, ONE AMBITION. THEY BECAME, IN THE SPACE OF A FEW MOMENTS, THE SINGLE-MINDED GIANT WHOSE IMAGE THEY HAD SO BRILLIANTLY RECREATED.



THE ILLUSION OF PETTY INDIVIDUALITY WAS SWEPT AWAY IN AN IRRESISTIBLE TIDE OF COLLECTIVE FEELING--NOT A MOB'S PASSION, BUT A TELEPATHIC SURGE THAT DISSOLVED THE VOICES OF THOUSANDS INTO ONE IRRESISTIBLE COMMAND.

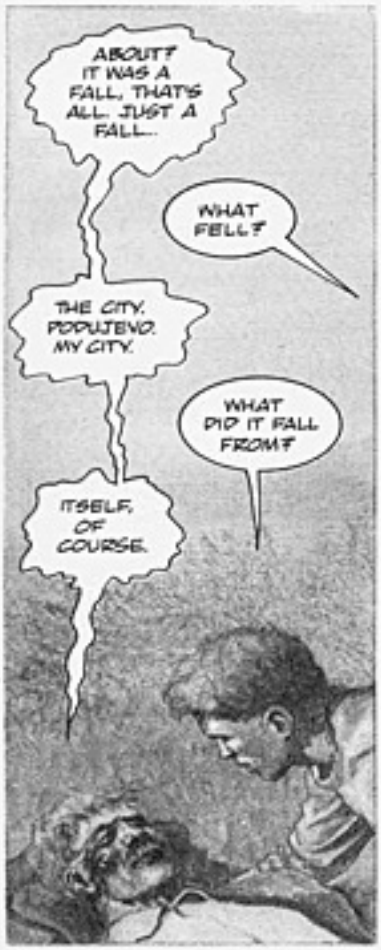
AND THE VOICE SAID: GO! THE VOICE SAID: TAKE THIS HORRIBLE SIGHT AWAY, WHERE I NEED NEVER SEE IT AGAIN. POPOLAC TURNED AWAY INTO THE HILLS, ITS LEGS TAKING STRIDES HALF A MILE LONG.

EACH MAN, WOMAN AND CHILD IN THAT SEETHING TOWER WAS SIGHTLESS. THEY SAW ONLY THROUGH THE EYES OF THE CITY. THEY WERE THOUGHTLESS, BUT TO THINK THE CITY'S THOUGHTS. AND THEY BELIEVED THEMSELVES DEATHLESS, IN THEIR LUMBERING, RELENTLESS STRENGTH. VAST AND MAD AND DEATHLESS.

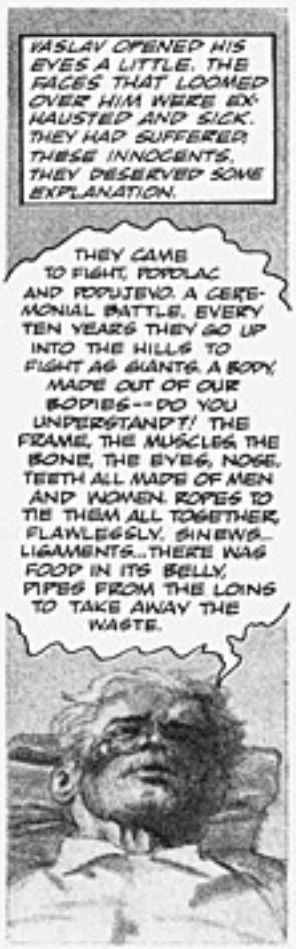
TWO MILES ALONG THE ROAD MICK AND JUDD SMELT PETROL IN THE AIR. A LITTLE FURTHER ON THEY CAME UPON THEIR CAR.
AND THE DRIVER...

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?
E-ENGLISH?
YES. ARE YOU IN PAIN?
PAIN? I SHALL DIE.

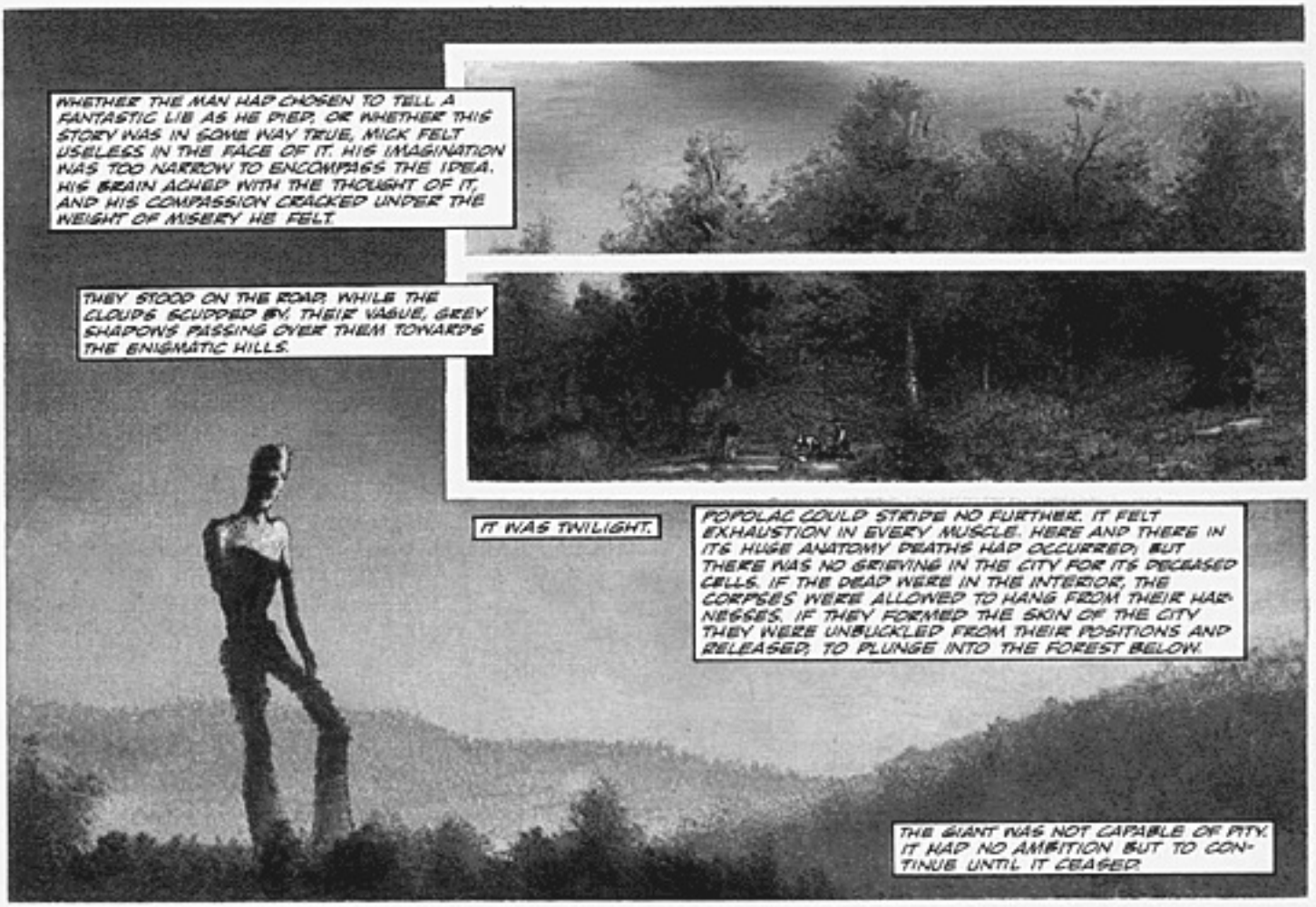
NO. YOU'RE ALL RIGHT.
I SHALL DIE. I WANT TO DIE.
TELL US... TELL US WHAT THIS IS ALL ABOUT.

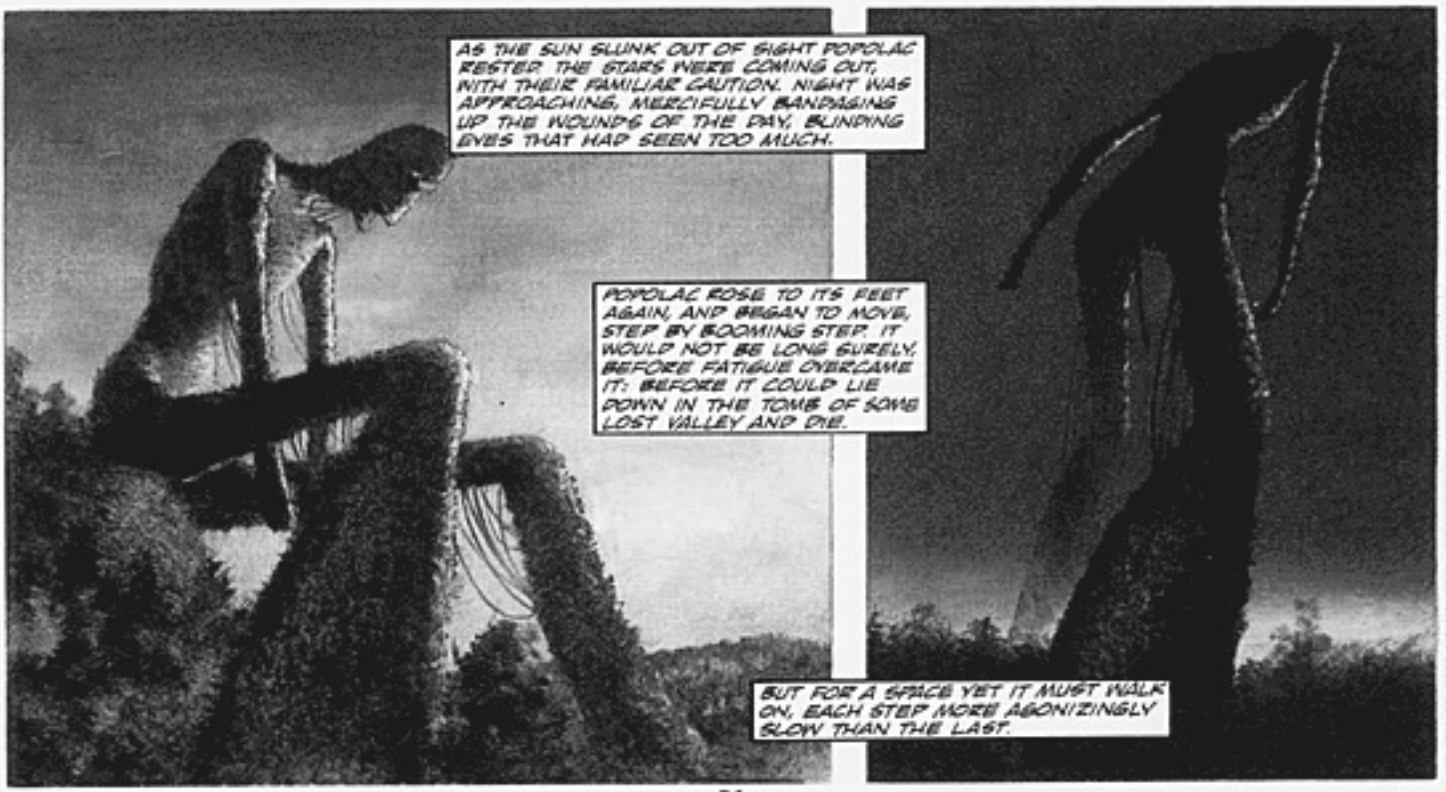

ABOUT? IT WAS A FALL, THAT'S ALL. JUST A FALL...
WHAT FELL?
THE CITY. PODUJEVO. MY CITY.
WHAT DID IT FALL FROM?
ITSELF, OF COURSE.

WHERE WERE YOU GOING?
AFTER PODOLAC...
PODOLAC IS ANOTHER CITY. LIKE PODUJEVO. TWIN CITIES. THEY'RE ON THE MAP.
WHERE'S PODOLAC NOW?

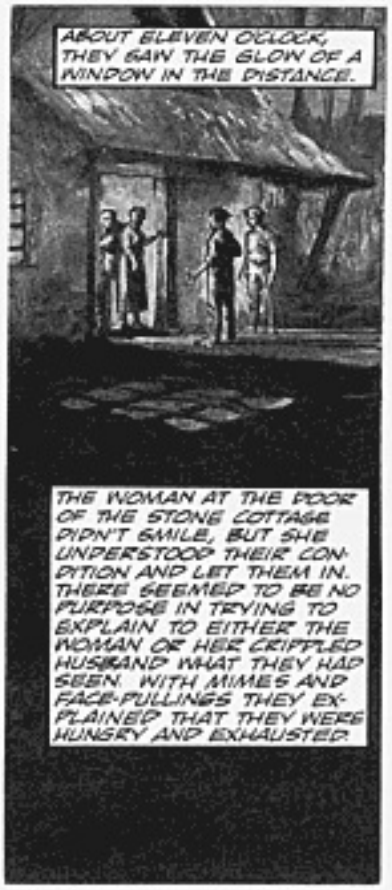

VASLAV OPENED HIS EYES A LITTLE. THE FACES THAT LOOMED OVER HIM WERE EXHAUSTED AND SICK. THEY HAD SUFFERED. THESE INNOCENTS. THEY DESERVED SOME EXPLANATION.
THEY CAME TO FIGHT, PODOLAC AND PODUJEVO. A CEREMONIAL BATTLE. EVERY TEN YEARS THEY GO UP INTO THE HILLS TO FIGHT AS GIANTS. A BODY, MADE OUT OF OUR BODIES -- DO YOU UNDERSTAND?! THE FRAME, THE MUSCLES, THE BONE, THE EYES, NOSE, TEETH ALL MADE OF MEN AND WOMEN. ROPES TO TIE THEM ALL TOGETHER, FLAWLESSLY. SINEWS... LIGAMENTS... THERE WAS FOOD IN ITS BELLY, PIPES FROM THE LOINS TO TAKE AWAY THE WASTE.

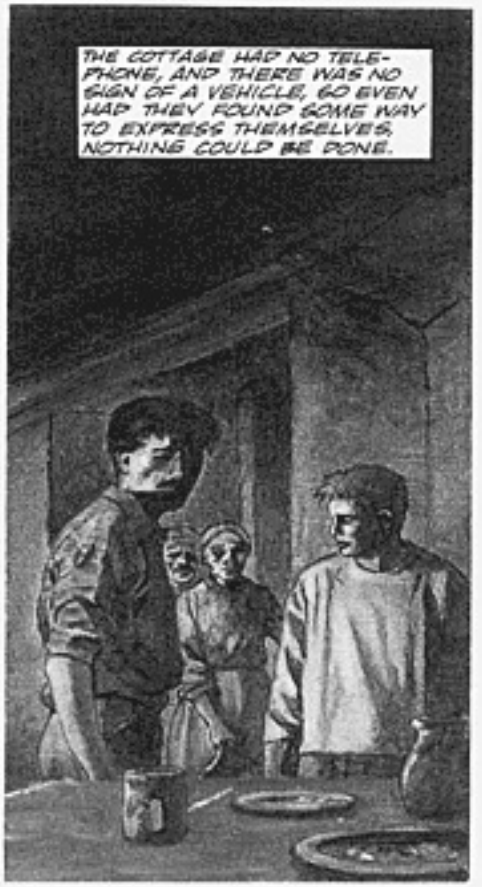
THE BEST-SIGHTED SAT IN THE EYE-SOCKETS, THE BEST-VOICED IN THE MOUTH AND THROAT. YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE THE ENGINEERING OF IT.
IT IS THE BODY OF THE STATE. IT IS THE SHAPE OF OUR LIVES. IT WAS A MIRACLE.
IT WAS A MIRACLE.


WHETHER THE MAN HAD CHOSEN TO TELL A FANTASTIC LIE AS HE DIED, OR WHETHER THIS STORY WAS IN SOME WAY TRUE, MICK FELT USELESS IN THE FACE OF IT. HIS IMAGINATION WAS TOO NARROW TO ENCOMPASS THE IDEA. HIS BRAIN ACHED WITH THE THOUGHT OF IT, AND HIS COMPASSION CRACKED UNDER THE WEIGHT OF MISERY HE FELT.
THEY STOOD ON THE ROAD, WHILE THE CLOUDS SCUDDED BY, THEIR VAGUE, GREY SHAPONS PASSING OVER THEM TOWARDS THE ENIGMATIC HILLS.
IT WAS TWILIGHT.
POPOLAC COULD STRIDE NO FURTHER. IT FELT EXHAUSTION IN EVERY MUSCLE. HERE AND THERE IN ITS HUGE ANATOMY DEATHS HAD OCCURRED, BUT THERE WAS NO GRIEVING IN THE CITY FOR ITS DECEASED CELLS. IF THE DEAD WERE IN THE INTERIOR, THE CORPSES WERE ALLOWED TO HANG FROM THEIR HARNESSES. IF THEY FORMED THE SKIN OF THE CITY THEY WERE UNBUCKLED FROM THEIR POSITIONS AND RELEASED, TO PLUNGE INTO THE FOREST BELOW.
THE GIANT WAS NOT CAPABLE OF PITY. IT HAD NO AMBITION BUT TO CONTINUE UNTIL IT CEASED.


AS THE SUN SLUNK OUT OF SIGHT POPOLAC RESTED. THE STARS WERE COMING OUT, WITH THEIR FAMILIAR CAUTION. NIGHT WAS APPROACHING, MERCIFULLY BANDAGING UP THE WOUNDS OF THE DAY, BLINDING EYES THAT HAD SEEN TOO MUCH.
POPOLAC ROSE TO ITS FEET AGAIN, AND BEGAN TO MOVE, STEP BY LOOMING STEP. IT WOULD NOT BE LONG SURELY, BEFORE FATIGUE OVERCAME IT: BEFORE IT COULD LIE DOWN IN THE TOMB OF SOME LOST VALLEY AND DIE.
BUT FOR A SPACE YET IT MUST WALK ON, EACH STEP MORE AGONIZINGLY SLOW THAN THE LAST.

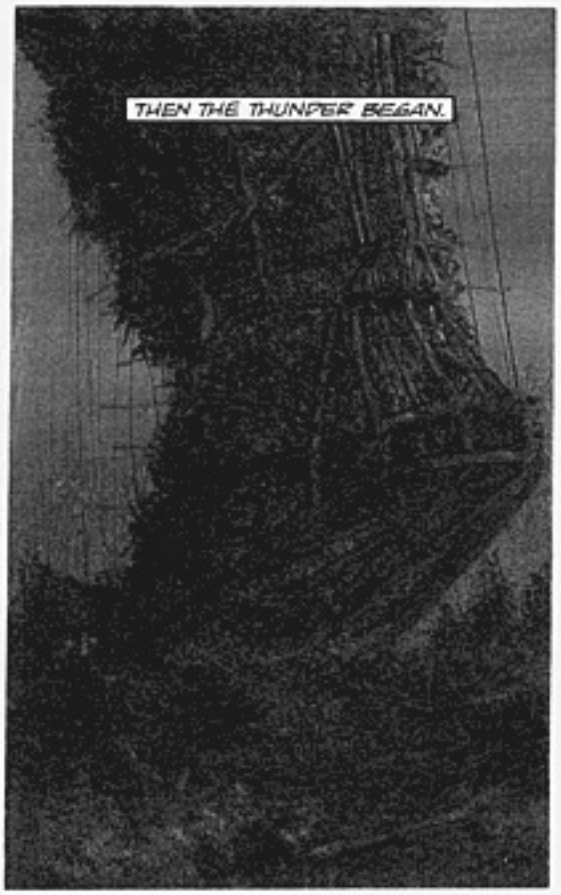
MICK WANTED TO BURY THE CAR THIEF SOMEWHERE ON THE EDGE OF THE FOREST. JUDD, HOWEVER, POINTED OUT THAT BURYING A BODY MIGHT SEEM, IN TOMORROW'S SANER LIGHT, A LITTLE SUSPICIOUS.
AND BESIDES, WASN'T IT ABSURD TO CONCERN THEMSELVES WITH ONE CORPSE WHEN THERE WERE LITERALLY THOUSANDS OF THEM LYING A FEW MILES FROM WHERE THEY STOOD?
THE BODY WAS LEFT TO LIE, AND THE CAR TO SINK DEEPER INTO THE PITCH.
WHAT DID HE MEAN--ALL THAT STUFF ABOUT GIANTS?
HE WAS TALKING METAPHOR... SOME TROTSKYIST TRIPE.
HE WAS DYING. I THINK THERE WAS SOME TRUTH IN WHAT HE SAID.
THAT'S ABSURD! THAT'S RIDICULOUS. NO.


ABOUT ELEVEN O'CLOCK, THEY SAW THE GLOW OF A WINDOW IN THE DISTANCE.
THE WOMAN AT THE DOOR OF THE STONE COTTAGE DIDN'T SMILE, BUT SHE UNDERSTOOD THEIR CONDITION AND LET THEM IN. THERE SEEMED TO BE NO PURPOSE IN TRYING TO EXPLAIN TO EITHER THE WOMAN OR HER CRIPPLED HUSBAND WHAT THEY HAD SEEN. WITH MIMES AND FACE-PULLINGS THEY EXPLAINED THAT THEY WERE HUNGRY AND EXHAUSTED.


THE COTTAGE HAD NO TELEPHONE, AND THERE WAS NO SIGN OF A VEHICLE, SO EVEN HAD THEY FOUND SOME WAY TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES, NOTHING COULD BE DONE.

THE FOOD WAS GOOD. IT BUOYED THEIR SPIRITS.
THEY WOULD SLEEP UNTIL MORNING AND THEN BEGIN THE LONG TREK BACK. BY DAWN THE BODIES IN THE FIELD WOULD BE BEING QUANTIFIED, IDENTIFIED, PARCELLED UP AND DISPATCHED TO THEIR FAMILIES.
THE AIR WOULD BE FULL OF REASSURING NOISES, CANCELLING OUT THE MOANS THAT STILL RANG IN THEIR EARS. THERE WOULD BE HELICOPTERS, LORRY LOADS OF MEN ORGANIZING THE CLEARING-UP OPERATIONS. ALL THE RITES AND PARAPHERNALIA OF A CIVILIZED DISASTER.

AND IN A WHILE, IT WOULD BE PALATABLE. IT WOULD BECOME PART OF THEIR HISTORY: A TRAGEDY, OF COURSE, BUT ONE THEY COULD EXPLAIN, CLASSIFY AND LEARN TO LIVE WITH. ALL WOULD BE WELL, YES, ALL WOULD BE WELL. COME MORNING.
FOR NOW, THEY LAY WHERE THEY HAD FALLEN. THEY KNEW NOTHING. DREAMT NOTHING. FELT NOTHING.


THEN THE THUNDER BEGAN.

IN THE EARTH, IN THE DEEP EARTH, A RHYTHMICAL TREAD; AS OF A TITAN, THAT CAME, BY DEGREES, CLOSER AND CLOSER.
THEY LISTENED TO THE NIGHT-HILLS ECHO BACK AND FORTH WITH THE SOUND. THERE WAS NO LIGHTNING TO ACCOMPANY THE THUNDER.

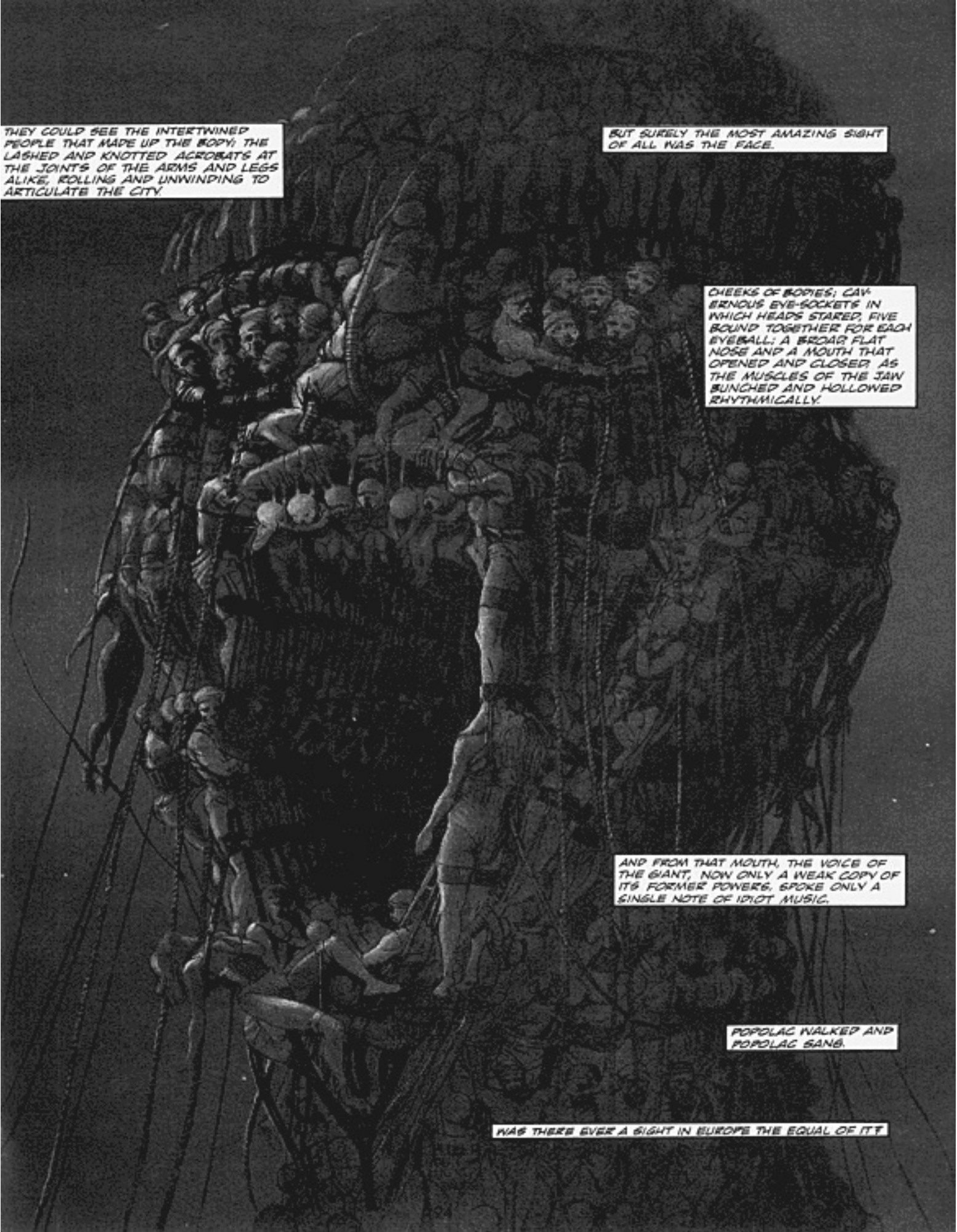
THE WIFE'S EYES WERE NOT GOOD, AND SHE DOUBTED WHAT SHE SAW WHEN THE BLACKNESS OF THE HILL CHANGED SHAPE AND REARED UP TO BLOCK THE STARS.
BOOM
BUT HER HUSBAND HAD SEEN IT TOO; THE UNIMAGINABLY-HUGE HEAD, VASTER IN THE DECEIVING DARKNESS, LOOMING UP AND UP, DWARFING THE HILLS THEMSELVES WITH AMBITION.

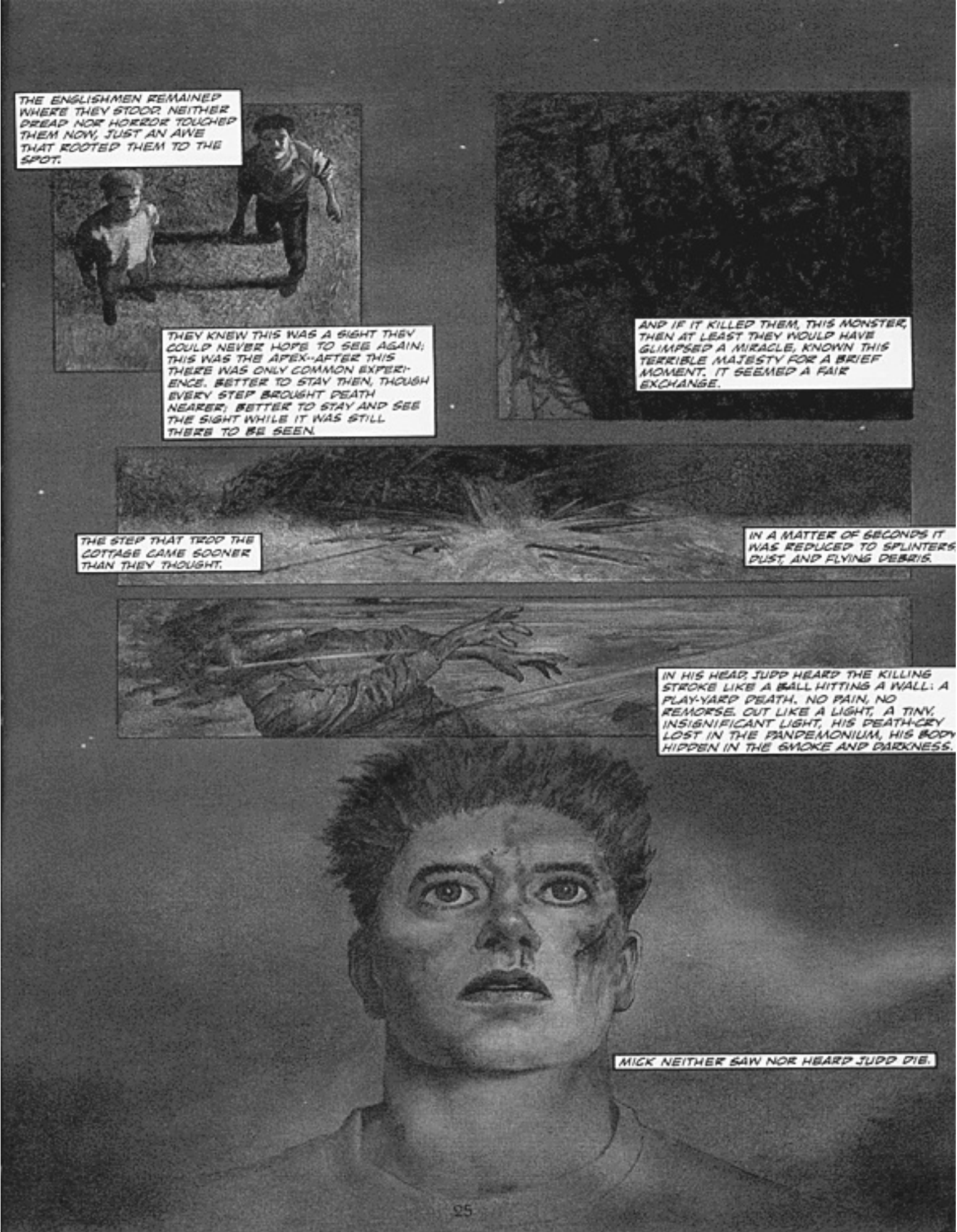
AIEEEEE

MICK WOKE WITH A START. HE KNEW THE NOISE THAT SOUNDED IN HIS SUBSTANCE: THAT EARTH-THUNDER.
KRASH
WHA--?!
BOOM
THE COTTAGE SHOOK. PLATES DANCED AND SMASHED OFF THE DRESSER. A CLAY PIPE ROLLED FROM THE MANTELPIECE AND SHATTERED IN THE ASHES OF THE HEARTH.

YOU SEET SEET SEET
HYSTERIA BUBBLED IN HIS WORDS.
BOOM

THERE WAS A PLACE THAT SHOWED NO STARS. IT WAS A DARKNESS IN THE SHAPE OF A MAN; A VAST, BROAD HUMAN FRAME, A COLOSSUS THAT SOARED UP TO MEET HEAVEN. IT WAS NOT QUITE A PERFECT GIANT. ITS OUTLINE WAS NOT TIDY; IT SEETHED AND SWARMED.
EVERYTHING THAT THE CAR-THIEF HAD SAID WAS TRUE. POPOLAC WAS A CITY AND A GIANT, AND IT HAD GONE INTO THE HILLS...


THEY COULD SEE THE INTERTWINED PEOPLE THAT MADE UP THE BODY: THE LASHED AND KNOTTED ACROBATS AT THE JOINTS OF THE ARMS AND LEGS ALIKE, ROLLING AND UNWINDING TO ARTICULATE THE CITY.
BUT SURELY THE MOST AMAZING SIGHT OF ALL WAS THE FACE.
CHEEKS OF BODIES; CAVERNOUS EYE-SOCKETS IN WHICH HEADS STARED, FIVE BOUND TOGETHER FOR EACH EYEBALL; A BROAD FLAT NOSE AND A MOUTH THAT OPENED AND CLOSED AS THE MUSCLES OF THE JAW BUNCHED AND HOLLOWED RHYTHMICALLY.
AND FROM THAT MOUTH, THE VOICE OF THE GIANT, NOW ONLY A WEAK COPY OF ITS FORMER POWERS, SPOKE ONLY A SINGLE NOTE OF IDIOT MUSIC.
POPOLAC WALKED AND POPOLAC SANG.
WAS THERE EVER A SIGHT IN EUROPE THE EQUAL OF IT?


THE ENGLISHMEN REMAINED WHERE THEY STOOD. NEITHER DREAD NOR HORROR TOUCHED THEM NOW, JUST AN AWE THAT ROOTED THEM TO THE SPOT.
THEY KNEW THIS WAS A SIGHT THEY COULD NEVER HOPE TO SEE AGAIN; THIS WAS THE APEX--AFTER THIS THERE WAS ONLY COMMON EXPERIENCE. BETTER TO STAY THEN, THOUGH EVERY STEP BROUGHT DEATH NEARER; BETTER TO STAY AND SEE THE SIGHT WHILE IT WAS STILL THERE TO BE SEEN.
AND IF IT KILLED THEM, THIS MONSTER, THEN AT LEAST THEY WOULD HAVE GLIMPSED A MIRACLE, KNOWN THIS TERRIBLE MAJESTY FOR A BRIEF MOMENT. IT SEEMED A FAIR EXCHANGE.
THE STEP THAT TROD THE COTTAGE CAME SOONER THAN THEY THOUGHT.
IN A MATTER OF SECONDS IT WAS REDUCED TO SPLINTERS, DUST, AND FLYING DEBRIS.
IN HIS HEAD, JUDD HEARD THE KILLING STROKE LIKE A BALL HITTING A WALL: A PLAY-YARD DEATH. NO PAIN, NO REMORSE. OUT LIKE A LIGHT. A TINY, INSIGNIFICANT LIGHT, HIS DEATH-CRY LOST IN THE PANDEMONIUM, HIS BODY HIDDEN IN THE SMOKE AND DARKNESS.
MICK NEITHER SAW NOR HEARD JUDD DIE.

MICK TOOK HIS CHANCE. HOWLING LIKE A BANSHEE, HE RAN TOWARDS THE LEG, LONGING TO EMBRACE THE MONSTER, TO REACH THE FOOT BEFORE IT WAS LIFTED AND HE WAS LEFT BEHIND.

VEEAGH!

HE MADE ONE LAST LUNGE AT THE LIMB AS IT BEGAN TO LEAVE THE GROUND, SNATCHING A HARNESS OR A ROPE, OR HUMAN HAIR, OR FLESH ITSELF-- ANYTHING TO CATCH THIS PASSING MIRACLE AND BE PART OF IT.

BETTER TO GO WITH IT WHEREVER IT WAS GOING, SERVE IT IN ITS PURPOSE, WHATEVER THAT MIGHT BE; BETTER TO DIE WITH IT THAN LIVE WITHOUT IT.

SCREAMING HIS SHEER ECSTASY AT HIS SUCCESS, HE FELT THE GREAT LEG RAISED AND GLANCED DOWN THROUGH THE SWIRLING DUST TO THE SPOT WHERE HE HAD STOOD, ALREADY RECEDING AS THE LIMB CLIMBED.

YA HAAAA!

HE WAS A HITCH-HIKER WITH A GOD: THE MERE LIFE HE HAD LEFT WAS NOTHING TO HIM NOW, OR EVER. HE WOULD LIVE WITH THIS THING, YES, HE WOULD LIVE WITH IT--SEEING IT AND SEEING IT AND EATING IT WITH HIS EYES UNTIL HE DIED OF SHEER GLUTTONY.

BELOW, FAR BELOW, HE GLIMPSED JUDD'S BODY, CURLED UP PALE ON THE DARK GROUND; IRRETRIEVABLE LOVE AND LIFE AND SANITY WERE GONE, GONE LIKE THE MEMORY OF HIS NAME, OR HIS SEX, OR HIS AMBITION.

IT ALL MEANT NOTHING. NOTHING AT ALL.

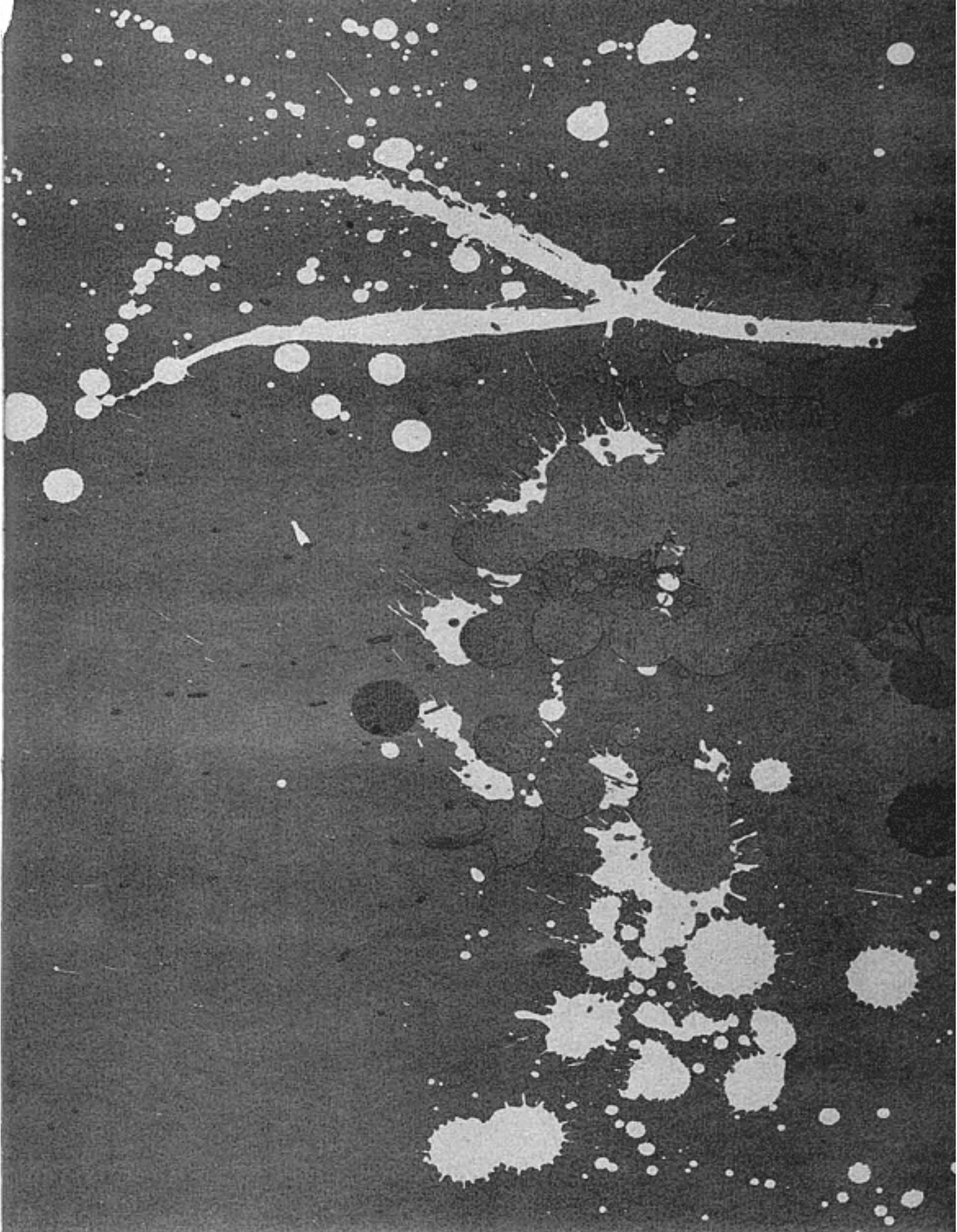
POPOLAC WALKED; THE NOISE OF ITS STEPS RECEDING TO THE EAST. POPOLAC WALKED; THE HUM OF ITS VOICE LOST IN THE NIGHT.

AFTER A DAY, BIRDS CAME, FOXES CAME, FLIES, BUTTERFLIES, WASPS CAME. JUDD MOVED, JUDD SHIFTED, JUDD GAVE BIRTH. IN HIS BELLY MAGGOTS WARMED THEMSELVES; IN A VIXEN'S DEN THE GOOD FLESH OF HIS THIGH WAS FOUGHT OVER.

AFTER THAT, IT WAS QUICK. THE BONES YELLOWING, THE BONES CRUMBLING: SOON, AN EMPTY SPACE WHICH HE HAD ONCE FILLED WITH BREATH AND ONIONS.

DARKNESS, LIGHT. DARKNESS, LIGHT. HE INTERRUPTED NEITHER WITH HIS NAME.

The End



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